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**Relations between The Kings and Nobility
of Sassanid Persia**

by

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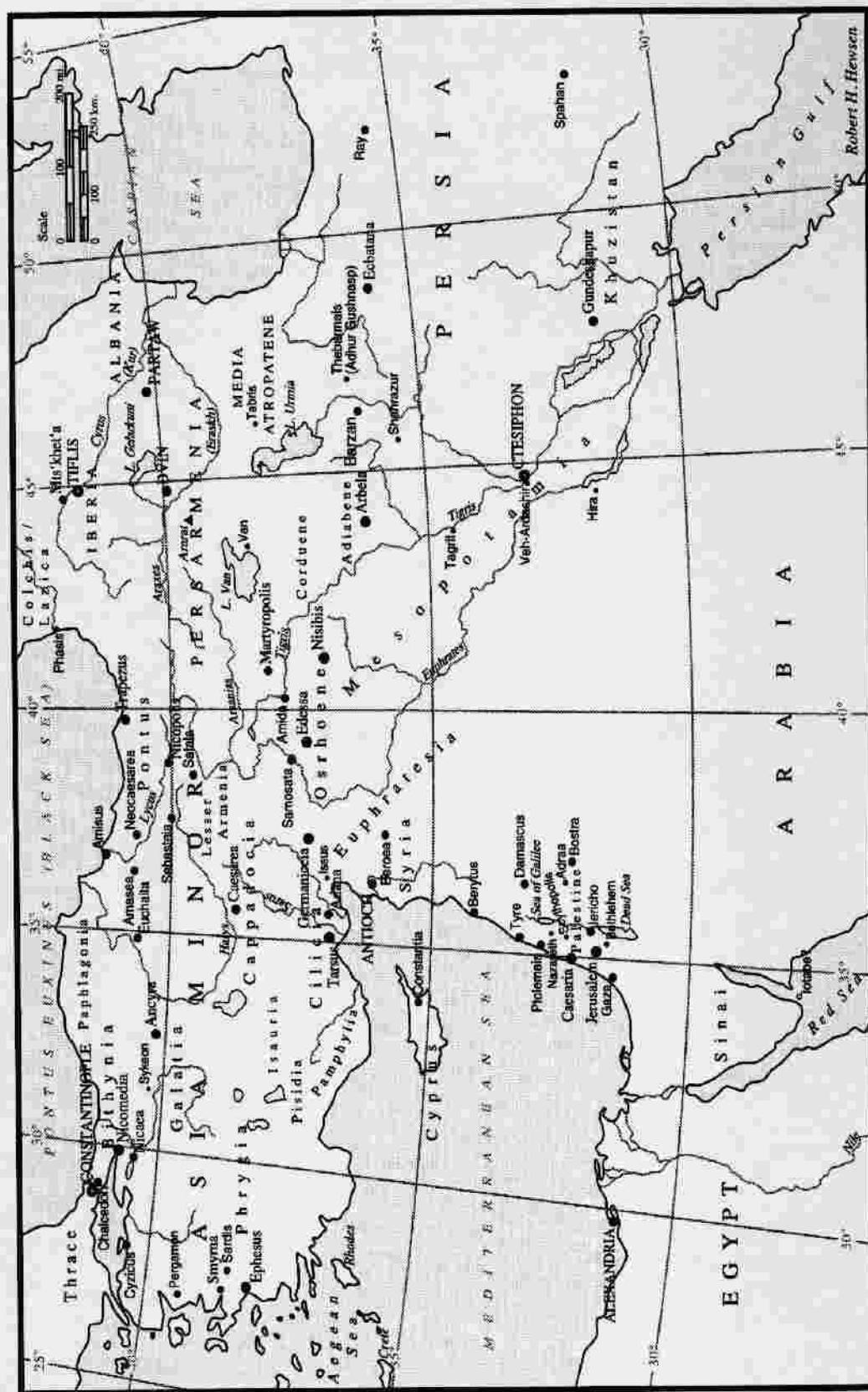
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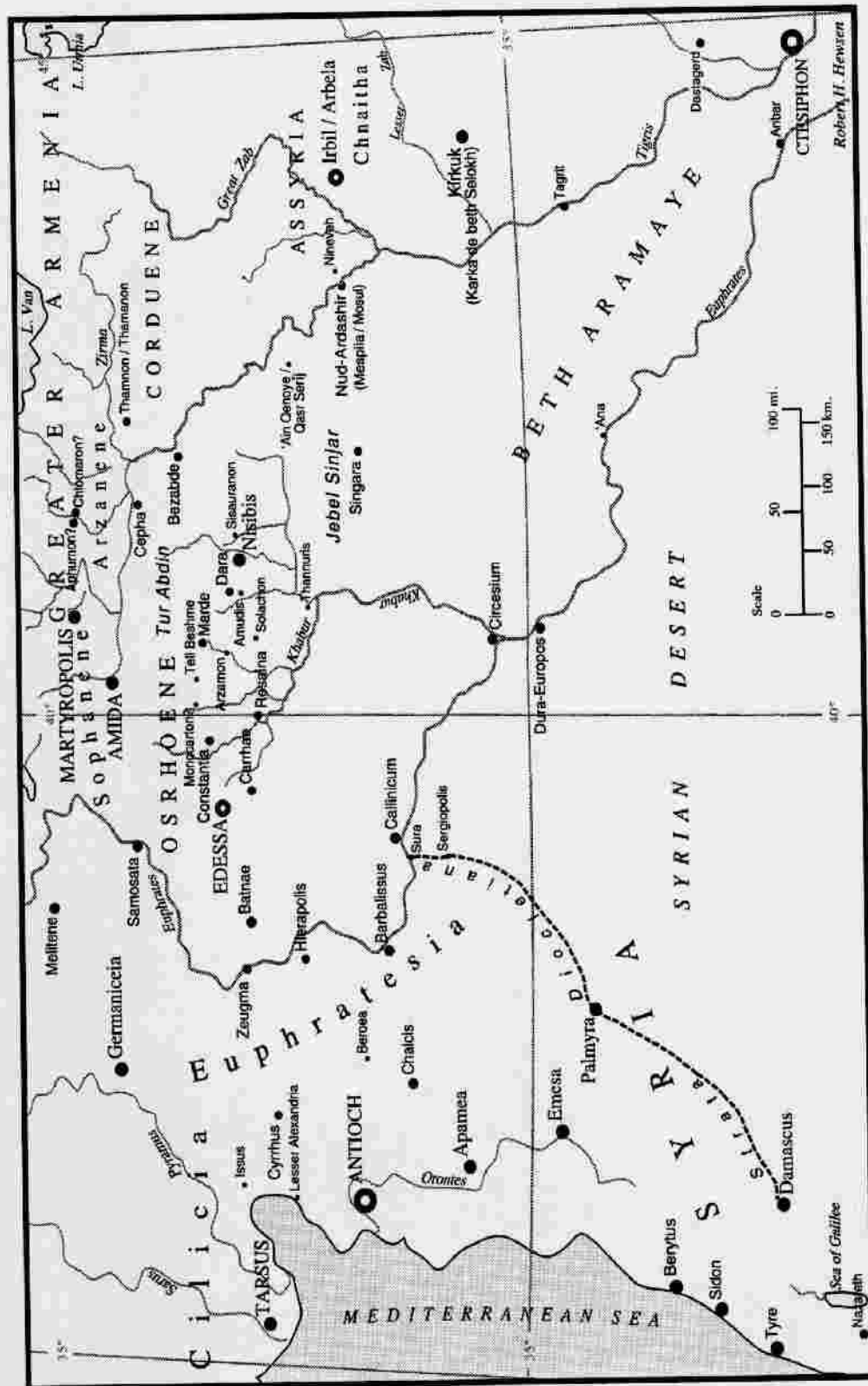
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The following thesis is an investigation into the nature of the relationship between the *Shahanshahs* ('King of Kings') of Sassanid Persia and their chief subjects, with particular focus on the period from the end of the fifth century until the middle of the seventh. The intent is to contribute an understanding of the manner in which this relationship did or did not change during the period in question. The primary materials used have been the literary sources that remain extant, particularly the work of al-Tabari, but also those of the various Roman and Byzantine writers where appropriate.

Although it would have been possible to treat the subject in a thematic manner, it was simpler to lay it out in a chronological fashion. In accordance with this, each of the three chapters corresponds with a period of Sassanid history. The introduction is concerned with the source material and its relevance to the question at hand. The first chapter investigates the years from the accession of Ardashir I to the death of Kavad. The second focuses on the reforms of Khusrau I and their relevance to the relationship while the final chapter continues until the fall of the Empire to the Muslim invaders. The conclusion then ties all of the previous chapters together and concludes the argument.

The principal contention, as set out in the second and third chapters in addition to the conclusion, is that there was no measurable alteration to the relationship between the *Shahanshahs* and their nobles caused by the reforms of Khusrau I, nor did it appear to alter substantially during the entirety of the Empire. The evidence bears this out, both that of the Arabic sources and the Byzantine writers.





Map 2 The southern theatre of war (Mesopotamia and surrounding regions)

INTRODUCTION

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The relations between the Sassanid elite and their Kings

- The Sources

There is a distinct lack of source material for the Sassanid Empire, even going by the standards of the late antique period as a whole, which has large gaps in a multitude of areas. This lack is particularly noticeable when it comes to the internal affairs of the Sassanid dynasty and the methods by which the kingdom operated. Thus it is necessary to take small pieces of information from a number of separate sources, many of which are at least one degree removed from the original events, whether by time or space. It is perhaps debateable which of the two is preferable or more useful. In any case, the principle sources for the Sassanid dynasty are a number of Roman or Byzantine histories, the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, the work of al-Tabari, and a variety of works by Syrian or Armenian authors that straddle the divide between the two great powers of the time.

While there is a paucity of sources for internal affairs during the entirety of the Sassanid period, this is most clearly a problem during the early and middle periods of the dynasty. While Procopius occasionally gives the historian a snapshot or vignette into what he heard of Persian affairs, the same cannot be said for Ammianus Marcellinus, who forms our key source for the bulk of the fourth century. And, for all of his faults, it would have been helpful had the extant portion of his work included the preceding century, for even less has survived to the present day from that period. There, the Graeco-Roman tradition is limited to a small selection of references in Malalas and other sources.

Fortunately, there are some mitigating factors. As with all of the Sassanid period, al-Tabari and the *Shahnameh* provide some coverage, although the value of their accounts vary. Neither mentions Kartir, one of the more important figures of the period by name, and Tabari's accounts of the shorter reigns is often brief to the point of containing little information beyond their genealogy and the length of their reign. This is also true of the accounts in the *Shahnameh*. Beyond this, the period has two additional resources to offer that later periods do not. One, although it is comparatively limited in its scope, is the corpus of Manichaean writings, particularly those relating to the life of Mani. The other, the rock reliefs that adorn the walls of Naqsh-e Rostam amongst other places, provide a uniquely Persian perspective on the period, showing the *Shahanshah* in the way that he wished to be seen, both by his own subjects and by outsiders.

However, there is still a large problem in that, without the grand narrative sources in the mould of Procopius or Ammianus for the third century, there is almost nothing to be said with any degree of certainty about the internal politics of the Sassanid dynasty. It is not until the end of the third century that any other major Persian leaders can be identified from the textual sources and then there is a gap until Ammianus fills it with his account of the campaign of Julian. Individuals do appear from time to time by name or by title, but there is almost nothing concrete to be said regarding how the Persian (and Parthian) nobility interacted with themselves or the *Shahanshah*.

One exception might be a passage from the *History of the Armenians* by Agathangelos, who stated that Ardashir met with 'the magnates of the Persians and

Assyrians', specifically identifying them as different from the Parthians. However, one of the magnates later sent to the Parthian king Artabanus is a certain Carinas or Karen, a member of what were later called the 'Seven Parthian Clans', similar to the House of Suren.¹ This would suggest that the Parthian nobility, or at least some of them, quickly came to the decision that it would be better to support Ardashir than the Arsacids, and acted on that. However, without any corroborating evidence other than the appearances of the House of Karen in Sassanid inscriptions as one of the great noble families, this is merely speculation. As one of the few times we can positively identify Persian nobility in the early years, it remains necessary speculation.

Beyond the woeful lack of evidence, there are a variety of problems with what we do have, ranging from those that are common to any ancient source, from Herodotus through to Procopius, to issues specific to a particular author. One notable problem is that ancient writers, as well of those of the Middle Ages, had a different view to writing history than modern authors. The truth was not always an end in itself; instead the purpose of certain works was to make a point, usually about morality, to the readers. This is particularly true of Roman writers and can most readily be seen in those of the early Principate, such as Tacitus, who used the acts of the Julio-Claudian rulers to show how the rule of one man inevitably slipped into despotism and tyranny. Given that Ammianus Marcellinus, the lengthiest writer of the fourth century whose work is almost explicitly a continuation of the work of Tacitus, used much the same model in his history, one might reasonably suppose that the format had stood the test of time intact. Matthews questioned this link in his work, but noted

¹ Agathangelos *History of the Armenians* 5-8 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p.12-13.

that there is a strong link to Sallust in ‘Ammianus’ conception of the ‘dignity and character’ of Roman history’² which still suggests that Ammianus had access to a traditional style of writing that informed his own methods. This is as likely to be true of the historians writing in Greek, and the very nature of al-Tabari’s writing style in the later books with the use of *isnads*, or chains of narrators, to convey information.

A further problem with most source material is the issue of errors in the copying process. This is not a particular problem in this thesis, as such errors are most often found regarding numbers, but it is a potential flaw in any source where the original manuscript is not extant.

The most obvious issue is that of priorities, however. While this will be touched upon in more detail in the individual analyses of the sources, it is important to consider it as an overall issue as well. It is partly linked to the differing methodology, but here it is a case of the writers of the time not being particularly interested in the information that a modern audience would need. This often involves information that the audience at the time would have been aware of, but that a modern reader, even a historian who specialises in the area, does not have at their disposal. This can lead to misinterpretation of the information in question, or to the historian being forced to speculate about it. In regard to Sassanid Persia, this is true far more often than is comfortable.

Even where the information is available, the histories written are often centred around one particular element or thread that informs the writer’s choice of what

² Matthews 1989: 32.

material to include and what to leave out. A familiar example might be the focus that Ammianus Marcellinus maintains on the career of his hero Julian the Apostate in the relevant books of his work. Of course, as Emperor, it would only be natural for the spotlight to be on Julian, but even in the earlier years of his life, Julian is the principle interest of Ammianus' work. In many ways, his story is the tragedy that Ammianus is attempting to reproduce, in a way that mimics the format of a Greek tragedy.

This leads directly to another difference. While modern history is concerned with the analysis of past events, ancient historians were sometimes more concerned with the literary merits of their work and the moral to be drawn from this than the precise truth, although it is not universally true by any means. The traditional example of this is the speeches so beloved of many ancient authors. In most cases, we are not able to determine whether these words are what were actually spoken by the general or politician in question, a summary of the speech, mostly accurate but framed in the words of the author or whether it is purely the invention of the writer with no input from any other source. To this, we must add the complication that, even when the author was intending to stay true to the speech that was made, there is often no indication that they have written evidence or anything other than their own memory to go by. This would not be a problem if they were writing immediately after the speech was made, but this does not seem to have been true of the majority of writers if any. An example might be Thucydides, who was writing during the war that was the subject of his writing, or Procopius, who had some direct experience of the events that he described. On the other hand, there were those like Herodotus or Tacitus who wrote sometime after the events that they described and relied primarily

on evidence provided to them by eyewitnesses. Not all are helpful enough to tell us specifically where they received their information (the Arabic sources are an exception in this regard although some of the Roman and Byzantine writers name their sources). Still, it is sometimes possible to determine where they have directly taken text from another source but this does not always help when the original source is no longer in existence. In particular there are some sources where it is impossible to speak of the reliability of the source as a whole. Instead it is necessary to take each piece of information on its own merits.

One method of looking at this subject might be to consider truth to be a spectrum. At one end, there were writers such as Thucydides who are faithful to the truth as they heard it. They reported the facts directly, with comparatively little interpolation of their own opinions or interpretations. In that way, they were the closest to the modern ideal of history, although even these have flaws from a present-day perspective, due to the occasional assumption of knowledge that has been lost. At the other end, however, are to be found Agathias and those authors like him. These, for a variety of reasons, were entirely unreliable when it came to the facts of which they wrote.

Worse still, it was a common literary device to avow that a particular work would be different from all the others in some way, whether it be in faithfulness to the truth or in some other fashion. A good example of this is the passage with which Procopius begins his *History of the Wars*:³

³ Procopius *History of the Wars* I.1.4-5.

It was his conviction that while cleverness is appropriate to rhetoric, and inventiveness to poetry, truth alone is appropriate to history. In accordance with this principle he has not concealed the failures of even his most intimate acquaintances, but has written down with complete accuracy everything which befell those concerned, whether it happened to be done well or ill by them.

Even were it not for the fact that this comment is exactly the sort that he purports to find inappropriate for history, as it appears to be based more on cleverness than the truth, the sequel would have proved it inaccurate. Given that Procopius later wrote another work commonly known as the *Secret History*, within which he purports to reveal all of the secrets that he could not disclose in his “official” history, one or the other statement is decidedly wrong. As such, it appears unlikely that either claim is true, and it is important to be wary of any such claim where it cannot be supported by substantial evidence.

To conclude this introduction, there is a particular section from the work of Thucydides that frames his view of his own methodology:⁴

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words

⁴ Thucydides I.22.

that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for in each situation.

And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eyewitnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover: different eyewitnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories. And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever.

This should show the reader why it is that Thucydides is regarded by many as the first true historian. However, it also shows why it is impossible to trust any ancient source fully – even with the best will in the world and a commitment to the truth, most were relying on word of mouth and the stories of eyewitnesses, sometimes years after the event.

The information that is provided in the source is the key to its usefulness, above even the reliability or lack thereof. It is usually possible to sort the truth, or the probable truth, from the fiction within a source, but if the information is not present, then a historian is reduced to conjecture. It is unfortunate that, for the majority of the early period of the Sassanid dynasty, it is to conjecture that a historian is reduced to fill in the gaps that exist between the sources. The late fifth century through to the end of the empire has the most ample material to survive, with a variety to compare and contrast. This allows for some sifting to determine the most likely course of events, and given the wide disparity in both the date and location of writing for the contemporary (or near contemporary) literature and the later Arabic tradition, there is little danger of direct crossover between them. Indeed, following the end of the last war between the empires in 628, Byzantine writers are of little use regarding Persian affairs, particularly by the time of the Arab invasions. They have affairs of more immediate interest – namely the internal affairs of their own empire. Unfortunately, it is at this point that the Arab sources become more and more unreliable when it comes to the details of events, with such unlikely stories as that in al-Tabari stating in his account of the battle of Nihawand that ‘the Persians went forth, having fastened themselves to one another with chains so that they could not flee’.⁵ In his earlier account of the battle of al-Qadisiyyah, he said much the same – ‘[the Persians] bound themselves with chains’.⁶ Finally, a similar note is made of the battle of Yarmuk regarding the Byzantine infantry.⁷ This is a notable example, although the numbers given for the Persian army are suspect as well – one of the *isnads* said that there were one hundred and twenty thousand Persians at the battle. We have other accounts of the strength of Persian armies such as at Dara when

⁵ Al-Tabari 2598.

⁶ Al-Tabari 2294.

⁷ Al-Tabari 2089.

Procopius gave the figure of forty thousand⁸ or a similar number for the army that Bahram Chobin brought to oppose the returning Khusrau II and his Byzantine supporters from Theophylact.⁹ Given that similar numbers are quoted for Roman and Byzantine armies, it is likely that this was the average size for an army operating in the eastern theatre. At al-Qadisiyyah, there were thirty thousand Muslims according to al-Tabari,¹⁰ and it is perhaps more accurate to suppose that there were between thirty and sixty thousand Persians.

More specific to this thesis is the quantity of information that we are given on internal affairs in Persia. Obviously, this varied from text to text, but the overall quantity is regrettably low. Once again, this is often determined by the interest of the writer in Persia as anything more than the equivalent of the generic villain. A particularly good example is Ammianus Marcellinus, who, despite being the most complete history of the fourth century to survive, tells us almost nothing about the internal politics of Persia. He gave us the names of a handful of Persian nobility alive at the time but that is all. He has a summary of Persia as a country that does not need to be repeated here, but which is a mixture of fact and fiction, which hardly adds to our knowledge of Persian society.¹¹ In short, despite being the key source for the Roman side of the frontier, Ammianus remains almost useless for the purposes of this thesis. He is overshadowed by the later sources, such as Menander Protector, who may be fragmentary, but still provides more information, let alone Procopius.

⁸ Procopius *Wars* I.13.23.

⁹ Theophylact V.9.5.

¹⁰ Al-Tabari 2222.

¹¹ Ammianus Marcellinus XXIII.6.75-84.

One consideration is that the writers of the third and fourth centuries had not had the experience with Persia that those of later years had. As such, it is possible that they still viewed them as no better than the Parthians who preceded them. Certainly, those writers also had other areas of the empire to consider. Therefore it is logical that the Byzantine authors, for whom Persia was a looming presence to the east, would be more interested in writing about the great enemy and they had also had more experience of how the Persians were closer to their empire in status than any other nation. Thus, the change from Persians as merely the enemy in Ammianus to the Persians as individuals and personalities in their own right in later works is not as surprising as one might think.

While it is true that there is a small amount of useful source material surviving, it is spread across a large number of different texts. Therefore it would be impossible to analyse them all with the attention that they deserve in the space available.

For the sake of ease, I will briefly summarise the sources by period. The *Shahnameh* and al-Tabari cover the entire Sassanid dynasty. Other than these two, the third century is covered only by fragmentary works, as is the fourth century with the exception of Ammianus Marcellinus. Various fragments take us through the fifth century until we join Procopius in the sixth century. Following his conclusion, Menander Protector, Theophylact and then Sebeos conclude the century and lead through the last war between the Byzantines and the Sassanids, until we are left with only al-Tabari and the *Shahnameh* to see out the last years of the dynasty. These, of course, are not the only texts to survive – there are also a number of ecclesiastical histories covering the later period to varying degrees of accuracy, some *Lives of*

Saints and works such as the *Khuzistan Chronicle*. On the other hand, they are the primary ones for their period, however fragmentary or lacking in useful information they may be. In the earlier period in particular, often there is no other option. It is for this reason that the majority of the thesis will focus on the later period, from the end of the fifth century onwards, because there is sufficient material to make discussion of the nobility and their relationship with the *Shahanshahs* meaningful. For the first two or three centuries, it is much harder although there are some specific instances and individuals that will be dealt with.

Next must come the reliability of the information that is provided in the works we have. While the details of this discussion will be kept in the individual chapters, so that material is quoted close to the debate in question, it is useful to discuss it as a general rule here as well.

The closest text to a contemporary Persian source that remains extant is the *Shahnameh*, or Book of Kings. It was written by the poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940-1020) in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and tells the story of Iran before the Islamic invasions, from Kayumars, the first king, to Yazdgird III, the last king.¹² As a source, it is not often used by historians for direct research, possibly because of its obvious faults discussed below, but it has merit at times for comparison with al-Tabari and other Arabic sources, as they all are part of the *Khvadhaynamagh* tradition, dating back to the Pahlavi Book of Lords.¹³ In addition, it is the closest surviving work to any Persian tradition, and thus merits some consideration on that basis. The primary use for it comes in comparison with other sources or traditions.

¹² Davis 2006: xviii.

¹³ Cameron 1969: 113.

However, there are some considerable issues that mean it should not be trusted as a source on its own, nor should it be rated above the works of historians. Regardless of the accuracy in parts, it remains a partly mythical history of Iran since the earliest days. While the mythology is most prevalent in the early parts, it remains present in the latter era, such as the use of sorcerers by Saveh Shah when he fought against Bahram Chobin.¹⁴ Equally, even when this is not the case, the Persian tradition that makes it a useful source can also be a problem. This is primarily because, while it seems to be originally based upon the archives of the Sassanid kings and the basic structure of the individual stories may be sound, there is the chance that they have become influenced at a later point by the process of being passed along from one generation to the next.¹⁵ As neither the original archives nor the *Khvadhaynamagh* are extant, there is no way to check it. Again, while the reports of the more contemporary sources – such as Theophylact or Sebeos – paint Bahram Chobin either in neutral terms¹⁶ or as a wicked usurper¹⁷ according to preference, the *Shahnameh* made him the perfect example of Persian nobility, the knight beyond reproach until he was tainted by greed.¹⁸ Another interesting passage is that dealing with Khusrau II and his queen Shirin. It is written more in the style of a romance than of a history, focussing on the relationship than on the history of the empire to the degree that the war of 602-628 is hardly mentioned. Nevertheless, despite its downfalls as a source, it does provide us with a useful window on the majesty of the Persian court as it was seen in later years.

¹⁴ *Shahnameh* p.741.

¹⁵ Cameron 1969: 69.

¹⁶ Sebeos 74.

¹⁷ Theophylact III.18.13.

¹⁸ *Shahnameh* p.727-759.

Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923) wrote his History of Prophets and Kings (*Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*) before the composition of the *Shahnameh*, and it is the most extensive history of the period, stretching from the Creation of the World to 915.¹⁹ Much of the work covers the Islamic period from the 620s to the end, with all but the first five volumes of the translation²⁰ relating to this period, and of those only one refers to the Sassanids, beginning with the accession of Ardashir I and ending with Yazdgird III, the last king. His reign is covered in more detail in the chapters relating to the Islamic invasions themselves.

Al-Tabari was a Persian Muslim born in Tabaristan, what is now northern Iran. His work is notable for being one of the few works to give a historian an insight into the internal workings of Sassanid Persia, and it seems to be reliable as a rule. However, this does not mean that it is without its problems. These come mostly, as one would expect, towards the end of the narrative relating to the Sassanid empire, particularly in those areas dealing with the Arab invasions, but also in earlier sections. As Howard-Johnston said of al-Tabari's coverage of the 'Last Great War of Antiquity': 'hindsight has played on his account'.²¹ The closer to the end, the more likely it is that al-Tabari's focus will be drawn to the south – there is a break in the midst of his account of the reign of Khusrau I to discuss the history of Hira²² that takes up a substantial quantity of text, for example, or his digression to discuss the birth of

¹⁹ Rosenthal 1989.

²⁰ This is a device of the translators, but it remains useful for separating out the relevant sections of the work.

²¹ Howard-Johnston 2006: 7.

²² Al-Tabari 900-958.

Mohammed.²³ Further, in the sections dealing with the last war, he did not mention the Turks that assisted the Byzantines in the fighting in the north of Persia.²⁴

Although they are not strictly a literary source, there are a number of rock reliefs, particularly at Naqsh-e Rostam, carved by order of the early Sassanid *Shahanshahs*, which depict particular events in their reigns. The most famous are those of Shapur I, which show his triumphs over the emperors Gordian, Philip and Valerian. While the reliefs appear to have fallen out of fashion at the end of the third century, the surviving ones remain extremely useful as something with which to compare the Roman sources of the time. They are also important in so much as they show us how the *Shahanshahs* wished to be seen by their subjects – as skilled warriors and hunters. Shapur I is portrayed as being on horseback in full royal regalia while his Roman enemies cower and bow before him.

In addition, one set of inscriptions in particular ought to be mentioned. This is the set carved by order of Kartir, the *Mobedan-Mobed* at the end of the third century. His writings are a guide to his career, and are perhaps the only carving such as this not to be by order of a member of the royal family. While the inscription itself is not particularly useful for the purpose of this thesis, Kartir himself is. As such, while it would be unwise to take his words at face value, for they are often clearly intended to play up his power and authority in ways that do not always mesh with the other extant writings, they do fill an important niche in Sassanid historiography.

²³ Al-Tabari 967-981.

²⁴ Howard-Johnston 2006: 7.

While the two most famous branches of the historical record are the Islamic and the Roman-Byzantine traditions, there is also a third one that essentially straddles the gap between the two. That tradition could be divided into two branches, one of which can be described as an Armenian one, split as that country was between the two great powers of the time, with the other as Syriac. Both traditions are valuable additions to the corpus of material – they are often closer to the events that they described than the later Muslim sources, but they are close enough to Persia to be both interested and aware of the internal affairs. As such, works such as the history of Sebeos or the *Khuzistan Chronicle* can provide historians with information lacking for whatever reason in the Byzantine sources.

One of the most useful works from this area is the history traditionally attributed to Sebeos, often supposed to have been an Armenian bishop known to have been present at the council of Dvin in 645, but the true identity of the author remains a mystery.²⁵ The history began with the reign of Peroz (459-484) and continued on until after the end of the Sassanid dynasty although the bulk of the narrative begins in the reign of Hormizd IV and focuses on his son and successor Khusrau II. It is primarily focussed on events in Persia and Armenia, although the Byzantine Empire is also mentioned frequently, particularly after the Muslim invasions and elsewhere when it related to the events in Persia or Armenia.

Procopius of Caesarea (c500-c554/562²⁶) was the legal advisor and secretary to Belisarius, military commander of the armies of Justinian. He accompanied

²⁵ Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999: xxxiv.

²⁶ Most historians place his death around the first date, but there was an Urban Prefect of Constantinople named Procopius in 562, which may have been the historian. Also, while the *De*

Belisarius on many of his campaigns, and this experience forms the basis for his work. There are three texts extant – the *History of the Wars*, the *Anekdotia* which is better known today as the *Secret History* and *De Aedificiis*, which covers the buildings that Justinian built during his reign.

The relevant work for this thesis is the *History of the Wars*, or specifically books I, II and VIII. The first two books cover the Persian wars up to 549, while the eighth takes it through to around 552. The other books dealt with the other wars that Belisarius waged on behalf of Justinian, and do not add anything related to this thesis. These books are perhaps the most useful material available for the period. Not only does Procopius seem to have had an interest in affairs in Persia, he was in a position at times to learn of the details as Belisarius' advisor.

However, this may not be as much of an advantage as it might appear. As Cameron discussed in her book on the topic, the relationship between Procopius and Belisarius may have prompted him to write the history of the Persian campaign as it affected his patron with less than perfect honesty. In particular, one might consider the first period when Belisarius was on the eastern frontier, when his failures at Callinicum and Nisibis considerably outweighed his success at Dara, something to which Procopius does not devote much time compared to his successes. In addition, Cameron felt that the three works should be seen together as part of a greater whole, based on references between them. Given the proven unreliability of parts of the *Secret History* with its picture of Justinian as a malicious and demonic figure and the equally twisted portrayal of the emperor and his wife (much maligned in the *Secret*

Aedificiis probably predates the collapse of the dome of the Hagia Sophia in 558, the precise date remains uncertain.

History) in the *De Aedificiis*, it is unlikely that the *Wars* are entirely safe from the same problem. Unfortunately, as Cameron also notes, Procopius is often the only source for large parts of the reign of Justinian and is frankly too useful to discard entirely. In addition, while his account of the fall of Kavad is flawed, this does not appear to be true of the bulk of his work.

There are, however, other sources for parts of the reign of Khusrau I, although they have issues of their own to be considered. Two of these are the work of Menander *Protector* and the account of Agathias. Agathias, who wrote his history of the reign of Justinian at some point in the middle of the sixth century, regarded his work as a continuation of that of Procopius.²⁷ There are two elements within it of particular interest for historians of Sassanid Persia. The first is an excursus on Zoroastrianism beginning at II.25. This is of limited use for the present thesis, however, and so we come to the second. Here, Agathias wrote an account of the reigns of the Sassanid kings up to his own day, using what appears to have been access to the archives of the dynasty itself.²⁸ This is exceedingly valuable, for it is the closest that we have to a Sassanid version of history. The next most modern accounts are those in the *Shahnameh* and the Arabic tradition, both of which are at least one incarnation distant from the original material.

However, there are substantial problems with Agathias as well, which moderate the benefits of his access to the uncorrupted annals. The most obvious is the traditional bias of western writers towards the Persians, as can be seen in Agathias' comments

²⁷ Cameron 1969: 69.

²⁸ Cameron 1969: 69.

on Khusrau's image as a philosopher-king.²⁹ Whether this bias was present or not would be irrelevant if Agathias had simply taken material from the annals. He did not, and inserted his own comments based on observations and opinions. Thus it is necessary to attempt to determine which evidence originated from the archives and which was inserted by Agathias himself to fill in a gap. Cameron attempted to do this in her article on the subject, and puts it thus – 'Both excursuses mix in with the hard information a quantity of decoration and moralizing provided by Agathias himself'.³⁰ Fortunately, the latter account is far less prone to the addition of western sources, rendering it far more valuable than its religious cousin. On the other hand, this allows for a more insidious problem. Agathias did not apparently gather his material from the archives directly. Instead he relied upon Sergius, his 'immediate source',³¹ and, as Cameron put it, 'if Sergius misrepresented his material Agathias had no way of knowing'.³² It would be redundant to reproduce Cameron's work here in full, so I will conclude by stating how unfortunate it is that a source with such potential should be effectively contaminated by 'an author who had only the remotest... idea of the real worth of his material, and even less of the right way to use it'.³³

A further concern with the entirety of Agathias' work was noted by Kaldellis. He questions whether Agathias even thought of himself as a historian.³⁴ He indicates examples of Agathias as a lawyer and as a poet, but also as a philosopher and a

²⁹ Agathias II.28 referenced in Cameron 1969: 69.

³⁰ Cameron 1969: 69.

³¹ Cameron 1969: 113.

³² Cameron 1969: 113.

³³ Cameron 1969: 70.

³⁴ Kaldellis 2003: 295.

scholar.³⁵ The quote that Kaldellis brought up – ‘that the purpose of history is to promote the teachings of ‘political philosophy’ by dressing them in pleasant garb’³⁶ – is not likely to gladden the heart of a modern historian and indeed is a problem remarked upon above. It is particularly unfortunate here, for, rather than merely placing a particular interpretation upon events, Agathias appears to have invented them wholesale when it suited his purposes.³⁷ While, as Kaldellis again states, this is indicative of Agathias’ literary skill, it is a nightmare for a historian with the primary concern of disentangling reliable facts from the morass of literary motifs. Regardless of the reasoning for this, Agathias cannot be regarded as a reliable source without some form of confirmation from another writer. It is tragic, considering the potential that his work held, but, again, it is an indication of the gap between the purpose and audience for which his writings were intended and the use to which we are putting them.

The second of the two, Menander, wrote in the reign of Maurice and claimed to be following in the footsteps of Agathias.³⁸ His work though is significantly more reliable and useful where it survives. Sadly, much of it has been lost and only fragments remain. In addition, there has been little work done on them by comparison. Blockley wrote a translation with some commentary and Baldwin an article, although there are a few studies in other languages.³⁹ Nevertheless, Menander preserved a wealth of information, and it is regrettable that more of it did not survive. Again, his primary value is concerning the reign of Khusrau I, and it lies mostly in the Persian nobles that interacted with the Byzantines in the frontier

³⁵ Kaldellis 2003: 295-296.

³⁶ Kaldellis 2003: 296 quoting Agathias Preface 4-5.

³⁷ Kaldellis 2003: 296-298.

³⁸ Menander Frag. 1. 26-27.

³⁹ Baldwin referred to those by M. Apostolopoulos, V. Valdenberg and O. Veh.

regions. The *Shahanshah* himself remained mostly a distant figure, while emissaries and generals provided a face for the Persian enemy.

Unlike the secretary Procopius or the lawyer Agathias (although Menander claimed to have been trained as a lawyer), he was not concerned with taking up a particular career.⁴⁰

But I did not take up the profession for which I was trained. For I had no desire to plead cases or to haunt the Royal Stoa and impress the petitioners with my eloquence. I therefore neglected my career for the disgraceful life of an idle layabout. My interests were the gang fights of the ‘colours’, the chariot races and the pantomimes, and I even entered the wrestling ring. I sailed with such folly that I not only lost my shirt but also my good sense and all my decency.

Menander continued in this way until the accession of Maurice, who ‘offered financial inducements to stimulate slothful intellects’.⁴¹

Unlike other earlier writers, Ammianus for example, there are a multitude of Persians identified by name in Menander’s history, and all of them are recognisable as individuals rather than as faceless traditional barbarians. He did on two occasions fall into the trap of mistaking a Persian family name for a title – first with

⁴⁰ Menander Frag. 1 7-17.

⁴¹ Menander Frag. 1 21-22.

Yesdegusnaph who 'held the rank of Zikh, which is the highest honour amongst the Persians'⁴² and with the Surenas⁴³ - but this is a minor qualm. As Blockley put it:⁴⁴

Amongst the Persians there is Yezdegusnaph the Zikh, intelligent, laconic and the master of Peter over Suania; the experienced diplomat Andigan; the effective soldier Tankhosdro; and above all Zacharias' opponent Mebod, diplomat, soldier, statesman, arrogant, cunning and bitterly hostile to the Romans.

In particular, Menander left us a full account of the negotiations over the peace of 561 and much of the other events of the period despite the fragmentary nature of the evidence. He is a very important source for the period. However, while there are some conclusions to be drawn from his work, he does not present a large quantity of material on Persian internal politics. This is a common flaw with western writers, and Menander remains one of the better of these.

Finally, the following is one example of events from the fifth and sixth centuries that are important for this thesis. It is placed here to allow the reader to see how the above information will be used in practice.

Compared to the better-known Manichaean heresy, the Mazdakite sect that arose in Persia during the first reign of Kavad has left little mark on history. First mentioned at the end of the first reign of Kavad in 496 with his association with them and adaptation of their doctrines listed as the major cause for his downfall in the Arab

⁴² Menander Frag. 6.1 11-13.

⁴³ Menander Frag. 6.1 272.

⁴⁴ Blockley 1985: 28.

sources, they disappear from the extant records until the end of his reign and the beginning of that of his son, Khusrau I, when they are listed as being massacred by the new *Shahanshah*. The entire incident continues to divide scholars, but it is still possible to deduce a significant amount about the relations between the king of kings and his nobility and priests from the incident as portrayed in al-Tabari and Procopius amongst other writers.

To begin with, both writers imply that there were no attempts from within Persia to reinstate Kavad,⁴⁵ even upon his escape from the Prison of Oblivion, and neither account of the facts details anything other than his escape and his return from exile with the backing of the Hephthalites which occurred in either 498 or 499 according to the sources.⁴⁶ Regardless, Kavad then went on to act in a manner that the sources consider much more befitting of a Persian ruler.⁴⁷ While it is dangerous to draw conjecture from the absence of evidence, it is worth noting this lack. The story as written in both Procopius and al-Tabari is centred on the exploits of Kavad himself, which probably explains the lack of focus on events in Persia, but it is still an interesting omission. The implication to be drawn is that the alliance of Kavad with the Mazdakites was unpopular enough to turn a majority of the nobility and the priesthood against him.⁴⁸

There is one major difference in the story as presented by Procopius and as presented by al-Tabari. This difference lies in the level of detail in which they record the events

⁴⁵ Procopius I.6 is perhaps the exception to this, but while he is aided in his escape by Seoses, there is no suggestion that any other member of the Persian elite supported him and it was with the help of an army of Hephthalite Huns that Kavad was restored to his throne.

⁴⁶ Procopius *Wars* I.5.1-9 and I.6; al-Tabari 885-887.

⁴⁷ Al-Tabari 887-8 and Procopius *Wars* I.6.19.

⁴⁸ Al-Tabari 885 and 886.

of the fall of Kavad and his return. Procopius simply noted that Kavad was overthrown by the common people, unlikely in itself if we are to believe the contents of the Mazdakite manifesto, because of the laws that he was supposed to have made regarding property and women.⁴⁹ Al-Tabari, however, instead definitely attributes the fall to the machinations of the nobility and the priesthood, and caused by Kavad's association with the heresiarch Mazdak.⁵⁰ The difference will be addressed later, but suffice it to say that there is a limit to our knowledge about the Mazdakites even beyond the normal limitations for Sassanid Persia.

In conclusion, the amount of source material varies greatly in both quantity and quality throughout the Sassanid period, although the bulk of it is in the latter half of the empire's history. This often precludes a detailed study of the internal aspects of the empire, but by focussing on the later period, it is possible to report on these with some expectation of remaining true to the original material while still remaining critical of it. This is particularly important when considering that there is often a gap between the more local but often much later Muslim sources and the contemporary but generally distant Byzantine and Roman sources. This gap is partly filled by the Syriac and Armenian writers, but these are not always available. Even where they are, they are also not as readily available as those sources written in Latin or Greek. Essentially, a historian of the Sassanid era must be ready to use a combination of sources, which is what I hope to do in the following thesis.

⁴⁹ Procopius *Wars* I.5.1-3.

⁵⁰ Al-Tabari 885 and 886.

C H A P T E R O N E

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The Early Years: Ardashir I to Kavad

In the early years of the Sassanid dynasty, evidence of the way that rulers and their chief subjects interacted is limited in the extreme, even given the lessened standards that have to be applied compared to other eras of antiquity. It was moments of especial turmoil within the empire that impacted on the external writers, and deprived as historians are of the writers who made the last two centuries of Sassanid rule infinitely more accessible, the only option is to speculate based on the little evidence that we have. It is the intention of this chapter to focus on two principal subjects beginning with the third and fourth centuries until the end of the reign of Shapur II, with particular emphasis on the high priest Kartir and the information to be gleaned from Ammianus Marcellinus. The second is two specific incidents – that of the Mazdakite heresy and its involvement with the overthrow of Kavad and also the extermination of the sect by his son Khusrau I.

As noted in the introduction, the most obvious example of how the Persian elite interacted with their rulers can be found in the person of Kartir, who served in important roles under at least four monarchs towards the end of the third century. For once, a single individual who is not *Shahanshah* has enough evidence regarding him in the sources to reconstruct the bulk of his career. This is primarily because of an inscription, written by order of Kartir himself during the reign of Bahram II, and relating his career to date under Shapur I, Hormizd I, Bahram I and Bahram II. The inscriptions, the most famous at Naqsh-e Rostam but with others at Naqsh-e Rostam and elsewhere, are indication enough that Kartir was an important man, for no other

inscriptions by any other than the *Shahanshahs* themselves survive. That the inscriptions and a handful of Manichaean texts is all the information relating to Kartir is probably the reason why he does not feature in either the *Shahnameh* or al-Tabari. Assuming that their direct sources did not mention him and that there were no extant folk tales about him, then the only potential sources would have been the inscriptions, and his absence makes it appear likely that neither al-Tabari nor Ferdowsi read those. It is also important to remember that, while Kartir is unique in leaving us a record of his own career, it is quite likely that al-Tabari would have had access to other such records or tales about important Persian officials that we now lack. Therefore, he may have considered Kartir not to be significant enough to mention. Again, Kartir is noteworthy for us because we know so much about him compared to others. However, almost everything we know about Kartir was written by him and thus is likely to be at least partly exaggeration. In fact, as it appears to be his legacy in a way, declaring to all who came in later years that he had been the most trusted and powerful servant of the *Shahanshah*, it would be odd if there were no exaggerations.

However, there is another indication of just how much power Kartir wielded in later years. Kartir appears again at Naqsh-e Rostam, this time in one of the rock reliefs that were carved beneath the tombs of the Achaemenid kings. One depicts the triumph of Shapur I over the emperors Valerian, Gordian and Philip the Arab, Gordian lying dead beneath Shapur's horse and Philip kneeling before him while Valerian stands by Shapur, hand held by the *Shahanshah*. A man in Persian dress is portrayed behind Shapur, most of the image damaged, but the face is still clear. Given the prominence of Kartir in later years, and even during the reign of Shapur

himself, he is the most likely candidate. A similar carving can be seen at Bishapur, although that one is more intact.

After the reign of Bahram III, the widely held view is that Narses either had Kartir executed or that he was stripped of most of his power.⁵¹ This is due to the ceasing of the persecution of Christians and other minorities during Narses' reign and the lack of any inscriptions or evidence for Kartir remaining in high office.⁵² However, this does not tell the entire story. To begin with, Boyce noted that a monument built by Narses in the pass of Paikuli included Kartir among those assembled, with the title of 'Ohrmazd mobad'.⁵³ If this is not enough proof, then there is the fact that Narses did not choose to destroy or even damage Kartir's inscriptions or the rock reliefs in which he appears – those of Bahram II as well as those of Shapur named earlier.⁵⁴ Finally, there are two other possibilities. One is that Kartir died, whether of old age or other natural causes shortly after Narses came to power, so that his last act was to be present at whatever occasion prompted the list at Paikuli. Alternatively, throughout Kartir's long career, he seems to have preferred to associate with successful kings and successful actions. Following the calamitous defeat that Narses suffered in 297, it is entirely understandable that he had no desire to add his association with this failure of a king to his great inscription. However, there is no evidence either way.

It is interesting that a Persian noble, let alone one of the priesthood, should be this powerful within the state. With the exception of Tansar and Kartir himself, there are

⁵¹ Ghirshman 1954: 317.

⁵² There is no direct evidence for this, but there are no records of martyrs or persecutions under Narses. C.f. Frye 1983: 131.

⁵³ Boyce 2001: 116.

⁵⁴ Frye 1983: 250.

few named priests in the four centuries of Sassanid history, and none have left as great a mark on the record as Kartir. On the other hand, as noted above, all we have for this perceived authority is Kartir's own word. No doubt he was powerful, but was he as powerful as some historians have presented him?

There is little evidence for the interactions between the king and his nobles during the reign of Shapur II, due to the lack of information in Ammianus regarding internal affairs in Persia. However, some information can be extrapolated from those Persian grandees who appear in command of armies or attending Shapur II in various capacities as well as from the other sources. For example, according to Theophanes and Festus, Narses, son of Shapur, commanded an army that overran Mesopotamia and captured Amida before dying at the battle of Narasara.⁵⁵ However, the most prominent figure in the Persian hierarchy besides the king is the Surena, who appears in Ammianus as the commander of the western forces opposing Julian's invasion until the king returns from the east.⁵⁶ He then is appointed as the ambassador to Jovian and negotiates with him on two occasions.⁵⁷ Once these negotiations fail, Shapur ordered him to recover the disputed territories by force.⁵⁸ His predecessor in the 350s was Tamsapor, who apparently had authority to make peace subject only to the decision of the king.⁵⁹ Clearly there was a considerable amount of independence granted to officials such as these, although their precise place in the command structure remains uncertain. Although the later period could suggest that a suitable title might have been *Eran Spahbad*, none of the Persian commanders, save for an

⁵⁵ Festus *Breviarium* 27 (from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p.154), Theophanes *Chronographia* A.M. 5815.

⁵⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus XXIV.2.

⁵⁷ Malalas XIII.27 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p. 7-8, Ammianus XXX.2.

⁵⁸ Ammianus XXX.2.

⁵⁹ Ammianus XVI.9.

unnamed *hazarbad* who accompanied Shapur during the 362 campaign, is given a rank beyond general although, here again, the title is mistaken for a name.⁶⁰

Ammianus commented that the Surena was the second most powerful man in Persia; however the Surena is more commonly identified as a family name, a member of the Suren family that was one of the so-called Seven Parthian Clans.⁶¹ So this is a debatable point, although it is a possibility that the two are not mutually contradictory. The other confirmed high ranking noble was Merena, named as the Master of the Horse, who led an army into battle.⁶² Following the end of the campaign, some satraps and other grandees are named in connection with the peace negotiations, but most only make a single appearance.⁶³ In short, there is almost nothing to say about the interactions of the king and the nobility in this period. The nobles still commanded armies in the absence of the king and the lists of how many grandees died at this or that battle indicates that they still formed an important part of the Persian war effort. The Parthian Clans retained their high position at least in part, although they are presented as being subordinate to the *Shahanshah*. One interesting little mention in the *Acts of the Martyrs* is that Shapur II was accompanied to war by the Chief *Mobed*, a man named Adarfarr, ‘on whose advice much blood of the martyrs of God was spilt in the Orient’.⁶⁴

As noted elsewhere in this thesis, we have little information on the workings of the Zoroastrian religion within Persia, due to the lack of sources interested or informed

⁶⁰ Bezabde *Acts of the Martyrs* 4 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p.216.

⁶¹ Ammianus XXIV.2.

⁶² Ammianus XXV.1.

⁶³ Ammianus XXV.7 and XXV.9 for Bineses, Malalas XIII.27 (from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.12) for Junius, Ammianus XXVII.12 for Arrabanes and Cylaces.

⁶⁴ Bezabde *Acts of the Martyrs* 3 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p.215.

about it. Thus, debating about how particular members interacted with the king or their fellow nobles is difficult at the least and virtually impossible at the worst. Therefore, the information that the chief priest was with the king when he was campaigning against the Romans is valuable.⁶⁵ Furthermore, that the king gave the *Mobed* authority over three hundred soldiers and sent him to deal with the Christians in one area is a revelation in terms of the influence the *Mobeds* wielded,⁶⁶ even after the supposed reduction of their power by Narses at the end of the third century.⁶⁷

However, it should be noted that Shapur II seems to have been a more pious man than Narses and it is equally possible that he returned powers to the *Mobeds* that his father had taken away. This may have been because of the success of the priesthood in predicting that his mother would give birth to a son who could inherit the throne, as noted in Agathias.⁶⁸ Due to the lack of textual evidence for internal Sassanid laws, this is difficult to be certain about and once again all that we are left with is speculation. It is clear that Narses did not persecute religious minorities with the same vigour that Kartir claims that he did, although as noted above, whether the persecutions under Kartir were that vigorous remains unclear. He certainly claims that he did, but aside from the Manichaeans, for whom there is external evidence, it is impossible to be certain that his inscription is truthful.⁶⁹ Even if it is, there is a great difference between a persecution of those who are publicly heretics, or members of another religion, and the systematic hunting down and extermination of entire groups.

⁶⁵ Bezabde *Acts of the Martyrs* 3-4 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p. 215-216.

⁶⁶ Bezabde *Acts of the Martyrs* 5 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p. 216.

⁶⁷ Garthwaite 2005: 97.

⁶⁸ Agathias IV.25.2-3 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p.143..

⁶⁹ Gardner and Lieu 2004: 102-108.

This leads neatly into a point that I have touched upon earlier, namely the way in which historians, lacking virtually any other point of reference, have used the material provided to us by Kartir's inscriptions and how they have presented his role in the Sassanid court in the late third century. As such, it would be useful to examine the message he ordered to be carved on the Ka'ba-ye Zardosht at Naqsh-i Rostam in detail, or at least that part relating to his persecutions and his establishment of the Zoroastrian faith:⁷⁰

And the false doctrines of the Ahreman and of the deus disappeared from the empire and were expelled. And the Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Nazarenes, Christians, Baptists and Manichaeans were broken up, and their idols were destroyed and the dwellings of the deus were annihilated and turned in places and seats of the gods.

Here we can see that Kartir named virtually every heresy or minor religion to be found within the Sassanid realm as having been 'assailed'. Now, at the point at which he had this written, he had been in the service of the Sassanid dynasty for some fifty years as Kreyenbroeck noted.⁷¹ Thus his actions were spread across a number of years, even if we choose to assume that the quote above only refers to his actions while *Mobedan Mobed*. In addition, given the lack of evidence, there is a question of whether the persecution was as widespread as Kartir might wish us to believe, as commented on above.

⁷⁰ Inscription of Kartir at Naqsh-i Rostam from Dignas and Winter 2007: 215.

⁷¹ Kreyenbroeck 2008: 11.

A good place to start analysing Kartir's place in the realm is Zaehner's book on Zoroastrianism. It shows one of the traps that historians can easily fall into when speculating on the role of a significant individual. Zaehner believed that Zoroastrianism was intended to be the state religion of the Sassanid kingdom, as Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. With this in mind, he casts Kartir as a reformer and an inquisitor. The following passage makes his view quite clear:⁷²

Under [Kartir] Zoroastrianism appears for the first time as a fanatical and persecuting religion. The list of the sects persecuted, however, shows how justified the early Sassanian kings were in seeking a unifying force that would weld their Empire together, for not only do we find Jews, Christians, Manichees, and Mandaeans mentioned, but also Buddhists and Brahmins; all these Kartir claims to have chastised. Zoroastrianism was actively enforced under the Magian hierarchy, the last vestiges of *daevas*-worship were uprooted and the worshippers of the *daevas* were brought back to the true religion. Every effort was made too to extirpate all non-Zoroastrian religions, including the 'Zandiks' who were probably Zurvanite materialists, and, what is more, strict uniformity was to be the rule within the Zoroastrian church itself. 'Heretics and apostates (?),' Kartir tells us, 'who were within the Magian community, were spared for the religion of the worshippers of Mazdah and the rites of the gods but not for the spread of propaganda: I chastised them and upbraided them and improved them.' Uniformity of belief was, then, certainly enforced, and the probability is that this unity was along

⁷² Zaehner 2002: 186.

strictly dualist and Mazdean lines. Kartir's policy must then be seen as a reaction, under a series of weak kings, against the personal religious policy of Shapur.

This is not a feasible portrait of any religion in ancient times. To begin with, there is no evidence that there was a Zoroastrian 'church' as such. There was certainly a hierarchy, with Kartir at its head, with lesser priests.⁷³ However, even if we accept Kartir's text at face value, which is dangerous, the evidence is against all other faiths being purged from Persian territory during this period. Clearly, other sects survived Kartir's time, for we find well-documented groups of Jews and Christians within Sassanid borders in later years.⁷⁴ Yazdgird I was supposed to have nearly become a Christian under the influence of the Bishop Marutha⁷⁵ while he also married a Jew – Soshandukht, daughter of the Jewish *exiliarch*.⁷⁶ Equally, given that Narses is supposed by scholars to have stopped the persecutions, it is clear that they failed to wipe Iran clean of heresy and other religions. And I question the notion that even Kartir intended to set up a centralised church such as Zaehner, and others, imply.

Under Bahram I the priest Kartir, or Kerdir, continued his career of consolidating the state church, and incidentally of self aggrandizement. He was probably the main influence in the imprisonment and death of Mani which took place under Bahram I.

⁷³ Numerous sources, including Kartir's inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam 27-30 (from Frye 1965: 218-219) and al-Tabari 816.

⁷⁴ Neusner 1983: 933-948.

⁷⁵ Socrates *Historia Ecclesiastica* VII.8.1-20 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.35.

⁷⁶ Eilers 1983: 499.

The religious history of the reigns of Hormizd and the two Bahrams is dominated by the figure of Kartir, who may have been the real power behind the throne of Bahram II. One might speculate that the priest used his influence in securing the succession to the throne for Bahram II, rather than for Narseh. The latter seems to have followed a liberal policy towards religious minorities in the empire, much like his father, Shapur, whereas the Bahrams were more amenable to the wishes of the conservative Zoroastrian priesthood. Apart from his religious impact, Kartir's influence on political affairs should not be underestimated.

The above comes from Frye's summary of Sassanid history in the *Cambridge History of Iran*.⁷⁷ Here we can clearly see that Frye stated that Kartir was a priest in the mould of the Catholic church as portrayed by its opponents at the time of the Reformation – more interested in his own gains, be they measured in wealth or in power, than in the message of the faith. However, this conclusion neatly fits into Frye's final comments on the Zoroastrian church – that it had become 'stultified with too much concern for rites and rituals'.⁷⁸ Thus, he sought to link the fall of the Empire back to the origins of the faith, and this conclusion necessitated that there be a single church of Persia and that its prelates were more concerned with power and ritual than faith. This is not necessarily supported by the texts Kartir left us. To begin with, they focus on his achievements as a priest – his establishment of fires, his establishment of the religion and its priests and the titles he held as a priest. Nowhere does it mention anything that he himself gained in material wealth from this

⁷⁷ Frye 1983: 128.

⁷⁸ Frye 1983: 174.

whatever Frye might think.⁷⁹ Now, while it would be unusual for a priest to do so, it is important that, while remaining critical, not to be overly cynical when dealing with this type of script. It is easy for an historian writing in the more secular modern age to assume that a message of this ilk is pure propaganda – that Kartir was more politician than priest. On the other hand, it is equally likely, if not more probable, that Kartir honestly believed in what he preached. He was, after all, the ‘Ahuramazda-mobad’ of the entire Empire, the ‘soul saviour of Bahram’, responsible for the establishment of fires throughout Persia.⁸⁰ Is it so unlikely that he was a true believer, who did the work because he believed in the message he spread?

This is not to deny that he wielded immense influence. As noted at the beginning, he appears in multiple rock reliefs and his own inscriptions would be enough to confirm his position as high in the favour of the kings he served. On the other hand, there is little in the inscription he wrote to imply that he had any direct influence, as Frye suggested, on the choice of Bahram II to succeed his father rather than his uncle Narses.⁸¹ It could certainly be argued that Kartir simply did not dare to write that on his inscription, fearing that the king would punish him for it. Even that would imply that his influence was not as great as is sometimes suggested. Otherwise there is no reason to assume that Kartir, traditionally portrayed as boastful, would not have included such a triumph of his career as chief priest – to be the kingmaker would have been a role that would have ensured his fame. And that is why I personally do not feel that Kartir played as large a role in that as some have suggested. There is no indication in any of the other sources that Kartir had a key role in Bahram II’s accession to the throne instead of Narses. Indeed, there is no indication that anyone

⁷⁹ Frye 1983: 128.

⁸⁰ Kartir’s inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam 30 from Frye 1965: 219.

⁸¹ Frye 1983: 128.

other than Bahram II was ever a contender at that point. Certainly, while he did not reign for long, there is no indication that a civil war broke out until after he was dead. Therefore, it is just as likely that Bahram II was able to ascend to the throne with the support of at least the silent majority of the nobility. This, combined with no indication that Kartir was known to the Romans or to the later sources, argues against him having been a truly major political player on that level despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.

Furthermore, this touches on another issue linked directly to Kartir, this being the power of the *Shahanshahs* at the end of the third century and whether they were being controlled by Kartir. It is true that Kartir was an immensely powerful figure by the time of Bahram II. He was high priest, had been elevated to the nobility, and was now known as the Saviour of Bahram's Soul.⁸² As far as we know, he was the closest man on earth to Ohrmazd with one exception, that being the *Shahanshah*. The king was chosen by Ohrmazd, as can be seen in the coronation carvings. Effectively, Kartir was the chief priest, but he was outranked by the *Shahanshah* and could have been replaced. To our knowledge, the titles Kartir held conferred no temporal power beyond any land he himself owned. Any influence he had over the king would have come from his status as an elder statesman - he would have had such status by this time. His power was limited to that which the king chose to grant him. Certainly, Kartir was influential under Bahram I and Bahram II, but assuming that he dominated the king, or that either Bahram was weak willed is reading far too

⁸² Kartir's Inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam 30 from Frye 1965: 219.

much into limited evidence. As a contrast, there is this passage from a Manichaean source:⁸³

When the Magi observed (them), they asked: ‘Who indeed is this who has come (in?’; and they said) to them: ‘It is Manichaios.’ When they heard (this, they shook) and were filled with anger so they went and accused (him) to Kardel. Kardel himself told (the accusations) to the (*synkathedros*.) Then Kardel and the *synkathedros* went (and repeated) the accusations to the *magister*. The *magister* himself told (the accusations) to the king. When he had heard these things... he then sent for my lord, summoning him.

From this, the opposite is implied. Kartir does not even have direct access to the king. He had to secure the assistance of two other officials, officials that are implied to be of higher rank than he was. Certainly, in this recounting, Kartir’s influence beyond the Magi would appear to be minimal. There is another account, also from a Manichaean tradition:⁸⁴

And [the king] stood up from his meal; and, putting one arm round the queen of the Sakas and the other around Karder, the son of Ardavan, he came to the Lord. And his first words to the Lord were: ‘You are not welcome.’ And the Lord replied: ‘Why? What wrong have I done?’ The king said: ‘I have sworn an oath not to let you come into this land!’ And in anger he spoke thus to the Lord: ‘Ah, what need of you, since you go neither fighting nor hunting? But

⁸³ Gardiner and Lieu 2004: 81-2.

⁸⁴ Gardiner and Lieu 2004: 84.

perhaps you are needed for this doctoring and this physicking? And you don't even do that!'

This passage is important for two reasons. First, it shows that Kartir was indeed high in the king's favour, for the implication is that those with whom he chose to dine and to embrace were those closest to him. However, it also indicates that the key reason for the death of Mani, one of the crucial parts of Kartir's reputation as a persecutor of other faiths, had nothing to do with the message that he was preaching as such, but more that he would persuade other Persian nobles to join him in 'neither hunting nor fighting'.⁸⁵ Evidently, this would have been a major problem for the Sassanid army, quite apart from the social ramifications.

Kartir was and remains an enigmatic figure for all that he is one of the people of the Sassanid era that we know more about. However, due to the ease of placing a particular spin on his words and his actions, the 'real' Kartir, if such a personage ever existed, has effectively been hidden behind the multiple veils that historians have drawn around him. To be fair, it is probably unrealistic to expect a fair judgement of a man such as Kartir when the only evidence we have is so polarised and limited, but to classify him as the prime mover in the politics of the time would seem to both overplay his importance and reduce the *Shahanshah* to a mere rubber stamp, an interpretation that is not supported in the sources, nor even mentioned. As the Roman Empire shows, if there is even the chance that a ruler is being manipulated by over mighty servants, it will almost always make its way into the historical tradition – as the examples of Claudius, supposedly dominated by his

⁸⁵ Gardiner and Lieu 2004: 84.

wives and his freedmen such as Narcissus, or Nero by his mother, show.⁸⁶ That there is no indication of this is as good an argument against it as is the supposition for it.

As to the relations between the king and his priests and nobles, this period has often been taken to demonstrate the weakness of the monarchy at the end of the third century and its comparative strength under Ardashir I, Shapur I and Shapur II. It has been suggested that, in the case of the first two, they had the advantage of being already proven as leaders before they became the king of the Persian Empire, whereas others did not. With Shapur II, the length of his reign indicates his success in establishing his authority over his subjects, as do the defeats that he managed to inflict upon the Roman Empire such as his defeat of Julian's campaign and the extremely one sided peace treaty to which he forced Jovian to agree. When this is compared with Hormizd I, Bahram I, Bahram II and Narses in particular, it is easy to see why they have been seen as weak. However, while Narses was destined to fail, the same cannot be said of the two Bahrams, both of whom seem to have died, so far as we can tell, from natural causes. The assumption that either of them was not master of his own fate seems odd given the lack of evidence for this scenario and contrary to the perception of Sassanid kings. I agree that Kartir was a powerful figure who had the ear of the king and was presumably the foremost authority on religious matters. However, there is a vast gulf between that and the suggestions made by Zaehner⁸⁷ and Frye,⁸⁸ which is unbridgeable save by speculation unsupported by the sources. Similarly, the traditional view that he was sidelined by Narses has no basis in anything more than supposition by Ghirshman and others.⁸⁹ It

⁸⁶ Primarily Tacitus but also Suetonius.

⁸⁷ Zaehner 2002: 186.

⁸⁸ Frye 1983: 128.

⁸⁹ Ghirshman 1954: 317.

is equally valid to argue the opposite, that he was equally important in the court of Narses and that he simply did not see the need to update his inscriptions or that he did not wish to be associated with the new king.

In conclusion, there is very little to be said with certainty about the king and the nobility of this period, even when compared to the later period. This is primarily due to the lack of sources and the nature of those we do have. There is a need to speculate and consider what little we have, but it is important to avoid assuming that this speculation is the truth, as has happened with Kartir.

Again, after this, there is a gap in our ability to narrate or even analyse the relations between the kings and their nobles. Al-Tabari provided a number of stories and examples that could be said to fill the void, but these are often lone incidents. For example, the successor to Shapur II, Ardashir II is said to have received ‘the great men of state’⁹⁰ enthusiastically but then, ‘when he was securely on the throne, he turned his attention to the great men and the holders of authority, and killed a great number of them’.⁹¹ His successor (after he was deposed) was Shapur III, who was murdered by the ‘great men of state and the members of the noble houses’⁹² and, following the death of Yazdgird I, the nobility chose to ignore his children, allegedly on account of his ‘evil conduct’.⁹³ Aside from Mihr-Narseh, who was vizier to Yazdgird I, his son Bahram V and Yazdgird II, there are few individuals who stand out, and those who do are not usually mentioned many times.⁹⁴ Aside from

⁹⁰ Al-Tabari 846

⁹¹ Al-Tabari 846.

⁹² Al-Tabari 846.

⁹³ Al-Tabari 859.

⁹⁴ Al-Tabari 849 for Mihr-Narseh, 861 for *Spahbad* Bistam and 869 for the exploits of Mihr-Narseh’s children.

Bahram V and Peroz, the reigns of the kings between Shapur II and Kavād were short in record if not in actual years. One interesting fact that emerges from al-Tabari's account is that the Chief *Mobed* was the one responsible for crowning the *Shahanshah*.⁹⁵ However, it is the reign of Kavād that provides us with the next rewarding case study.

Compared to the better-known Manichaeans, the Mazdakite sect that arose in Persia during the first reign of Kavād has left little mark on history.⁹⁶ First mentioned in most sources⁹⁷ at the end of the first reign of Kavād in 496 with his association with them and adaptation of their doctrines listed as the major cause for his downfall in the Arab sources,⁹⁸ they disappear from the extant records until the end of his reign and the beginning of that of his son, Khusrau I, when they are listed as being massacred by the new *Shahanshah*.⁹⁹ The entire incident continues to divide scholars, but it is still possible to deduce a significant amount about the relations between the king of kings and his nobility and priests from the incident as portrayed in al-Tabari and Procopius amongst other writers.¹⁰⁰

The most important sources for this event, although not the only ones, are Procopius and al-Tabari, which represent two slightly different although similar versions of the same story. To begin with, both writers imply that there were no attempts from within Persia to reinstate Kavād, even upon his escape from the Prison of Oblivion, and neither account of the facts details anything other than his escape and his return

⁹⁵ Al-Tabari 861.

⁹⁶ Although Yarshater disputed this. See Yarshater 1983.

⁹⁷ Wiesehöfer 1996: 208.

⁹⁸ Al-Tabari 885

⁹⁹ Al-Tabari 897.

¹⁰⁰ Modern authors include Patricia Crone and Ehsan Yarshater.

from exile with the backing of the Hephthalites which occurred in either AD 498 or 499 according to the sources.¹⁰¹ Regardless, Kavad then went on to act in a manner that the sources consider much more befitting of a Persian ruler – ‘And the kingdom was strengthened by Cabades and guarded securely; for in shrewdness and activity he was surpassed by none’.¹⁰² While it is dangerous to draw conjecture from the absence of evidence, it is worth noting this lack. The story as written in both Procopius and al-Tabari is centred on the exploits of Kavad himself, which probably explains the lack of focus on events in Persia, but it is still an interesting omission. The implication to be drawn is that the alliance of Kavad with the Mazdakites was unpopular enough to turn a majority of the nobility and the priesthood against him, a point to be revisited later.

There is one major difference between the stories presented by Procopius and al-Tabari. This difference lies in the level of detail in which they record the events of the fall of Kavad and his return. Procopius simply noted that Kavad was overthrown by the common people, unlikely in itself if we are to believe the contents of the Mazdakite manifesto, because of the laws that he made regarding property and women.¹⁰³ Al-Tabari, however, instead definitely attributes the fall to the machinations of the nobility and the priesthood, and caused by Kavad’s association with the heresiarch Mazdak.¹⁰⁴ The difference will be addressed later, but suffice it to say that there is a limit to our knowledge about the Mazdakites even beyond the normal limitations for Sassanid Persia and that a large portion of the work below will be supposition.

¹⁰¹ Procopius *Wars* I.5-6. and al-Tabari 886-7.

¹⁰² Procopius *Wars* I.6.19.

¹⁰³ Procopius *Wars* I.5.1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Tabari 885 and 887.

Regardless, it is clear that, for whatever reason, the *Shahanshah* Kavad supported the Mazdakite sect towards the end of his first reign. For this, he was removed from the throne by an alliance of the nobility and the priesthood and imprisoned. His escape and return are a matter of record, although interestingly one that is excluded from the account presented in the *Shahnameh*. Here, Kavad is never deposed, although Mazdak is present as his chief minister and confidant. Instead, Khusrau debated with Mazdak, and convinced his father to give Mazdak and his following to him to deal with. Khusrau then executed the followers by burying them upside down in the sand and Mazdak by a combination of hanging and arrows.¹⁰⁵ This account would seem to be a synthesis of the others, giving the predominant role to Khusrau instead of the nobility, removing Kavad's fall and presenting a single fall of the Mazdakites at a time presumably late in Kavad's reign when Khusrau is old enough to advise his father. Given that he died in 579, it is difficult to reconcile this with the *Shahnameh* account since it states that Khusrau was 74 when he died.¹⁰⁶ This would make the Mazdakite incident much later than in the other sources, and thus the *Shahnameh*, while a useful source on later opinion of the Mazdakites, should be discarded as an historical source. It does, however, support the existence of Mazdak as a person, something that is not always taken for granted, as commented on below.

One angle sometimes explored by modern historians, such as Patricia Crone (although she rejects it) is the suggestion that Mazdak himself never existed in the form presented in al-Tabari or the other Muslim authors and that the story presented

¹⁰⁵ *Shahnameh* p.683.

¹⁰⁶ *Shahnameh* p.714.

to us by Procopius and his contemporaries is closer to the truth.¹⁰⁷ Crone notes the oddities in the different versions based on the time and place at which they were written.¹⁰⁸ The two issues are separate but linked. Mazdak is only named in the later Islamic sources¹⁰⁹ while, in the Greek tradition, Kavad himself is named as the author of the doctrine that he sought to impose on his subjects.¹¹⁰ A further twist is added by the disappearance of Mazdak at the end of the first reign of Kavad in 496 only to reappear in the 530s, nearly half a century later, to be massacred by Khusrau.¹¹¹

Again, it is entirely possible to draw a picture of Sassanid power structures here, using the facts that we have to hand. First, it is clear from a variety of accounts that all power in the Sassanid state flowed from the King of Kings and his court, comprised of the major nobility and the Zoroastrian priests. Any group that hoped to be successful would have to have had influence here. Secondly, even without this, there are few cases in ancient or medieval history of major grassroots movements although there may have been exceptions such as the *bagaudae*,¹¹² because education and knowledge were concentrated in the upper classes of society, a trend that the Sassanid Empire does not seem to have broken. Thus, we can reasonably hypothesise that the leaders of the Mazdakite sect were nobles even if the bulk of the followers were the poor and those who felt deprived in other ways.¹¹³ Kavad promoted these

¹⁰⁷ Crone 1990: 21-23.

¹⁰⁸ Crone 1990: 22-3.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Tabari 886 for example.

¹¹⁰ Procopius *Wars* I.5.1.

¹¹¹ *Shahnameh* p.683.

¹¹² Marcone 1998: 367-368 and 531-532; Wood 2000: 502-503.

¹¹³ Wiesehöfer 1996: 209.

nobles within the court, granting them his favour, and began, so the sources say, to impose their doctrines on the rest of the nobility who lashed out.¹¹⁴

Once Kavad had fallen, it is hard to imagine that any of the Mazdakite nobles would have been allowed to survive long unless they recanted. Given that the nobility and the priesthood were willing to overthrow their king, the Chosen of Ohrmazd, it would be unlikely that they would be unwilling to kill a few of their own, leaving the sect without its leadership. However, even today, areas of Iran are all but disconnected from the rest of the country, so pockets almost certainly survived in backwater areas. Any further minor uprisings were presumably suppressed by the nobility or by Kavad, but the bulk of the followers simply carried on, safe in towns filled with their fellow religionists. Now, skipping ahead to the time of Khusrau's accession, the Sassanid realm had just ended a major war against the Byzantines. The king was new to the throne, and seemingly inexperienced, although the sources indicate that he was already known to be opposed to the Mazdakites.¹¹⁵ There would seem to be no better moment for the Mazdakites to reassert themselves, given that they may have expected a groundswell of support from the soldiers or even nobles dissatisfied with their portion of the treasure from the settlement with Byzantium, and the nobles who had recanted earlier may have resurfaced. This, of course, gave Khusrau the perfect excuse to make examples out of them.

This still leaves the issue of how the heresiarch Mazdak survived to lead the second uprising. Of course, there is no way to prove whether it was the same man. The original may have died in the aftermath of Kavad's overthrow or in the interim, but it

¹¹⁴ Al-Tabari 886-887.

¹¹⁵ *Shahnameh* p.681-683.

is entirely possible that someone else took up the name as a rallying point.

Furthermore, the notion that Mazdak died in the latter event may have slipped into the tradition at a later date to tie up the loose end that he represented in the tale.

Another possibility is that Khusrau himself engineered the whole series of events. At this point, he seems to have been new to the throne, and while he was the chosen successor of Kavad, he had at least two brothers that may have either wished to seize the throne for themselves or have been manipulated by others on their behalf. One, called Zamez in Procopius, had been disqualified from the succession by virtue of being scarred, but that may not have been enough to stop Khusrau seeking to reinforce his power.¹¹⁶ The easiest method of that may have been to assemble the nobles against a common enemy. The normal options were the Byzantines or the Christians, but fighting the Byzantines would mean a major war similar to the one that had just concluded in addition to breaking the Endless Peace with the attendant loss of valuable tribute, and persecuting the Christians was generally a means toward provoking the Byzantines rather than an end in itself by this time. However, given that almost all of the nobility seem to have been opposed to the Mazdakites, the sect was a much easier target with no concerns about external intervention on their behalf.¹¹⁷

As mentioned above, there is a theory that says that Mazdak was a later invention, potentially added in by Khusrau in an attempt to restore his father's reputation somewhat, suggested by historians such as Gaube,¹¹⁸ or indeed the reverse suggested by Klima – that Mazdak had been deleted from the earlier records by Khusrau in a

¹¹⁶ Procopius *Wars* I.11.4.

¹¹⁷ Al-Tabari 896-897.

¹¹⁸ Found in Crone 1990: 22.

similar attempt.¹¹⁹ Neither suggestion is particularly convincing for a number of reasons. The strongest one is that both theories assume that Khusrau had the power and the ability to orchestrate such a cover up. Above, I noted that, at the time of his accession, Khusrau's rule was not secure. He was a young king, one without the respect of the nobility, which he earned primarily by fighting a number of wars against the Byzantines and by his reorganisation of the state to give him greater power in the military arena. At this point, he could not have exerted that later influence to stop tales spreading among the nobility about his actions. Moreover, nearly half a century had passed since the first reign of Kavad, and the tale had assuredly spread since then, probably into Byzantine territory through diplomats and exiles. This by itself makes Klima's theory unlikely in the extreme, as there is almost no way that Khusrau would have been able to control the information reaching those writing history, keeping in mind that the writings that have survived are not the only ones that would have been written.¹²⁰ This leaves us with Gaube's theory, that Mazdak was written into the sources on Khusrau's orders to preserve his father's damaged reputation for future generations.¹²¹ Again, the major stumbling block here is the ability of the *Shahanshah*, even one as powerful as Khusrau Anurshirvan, to control the opinions of his people. Without the bureaucracy of modern states or some sort of state controlled media, he would have had to literally order the histories to be rewritten to include Mazdak, a difficult task even today, and nigh impossible then given the geographical limitations of travel, the prevalence of aural culture and the number of Persians that travelled abroad either temporarily or permanently, some into exile such as Hormisd, brother of Shapur II.¹²² Certainly, at the beginning of his

¹¹⁹ Found in Crone 1990: 22.

¹²⁰ Found in Crone 1990: 22.

¹²¹ Found in Crone 1990: 22.

¹²² Ammianus XVI.10.15.

reign, it would have been beyond Khusrau's ability. It is possible that he might have been able to achieve it later, at the peak of his power, but that begs another question. Why would he have bothered?

By the time we come to the peak of his power, Khusrau is a powerful ruler in his own right. He had waged and won major wars against the traditional enemy of the Persians, as well as against internal heretics and had a firmer grasp on power than most of his predecessors. Why would he have wished to use that power to rewrite history? He himself was above all reproach in the matter, and no amount of rewriting would have changed that. There were mitigating factors to his father's relationship with the Mazdakites and, finally, he had redeemed himself by ruling in the traditional mode of Persian kings once he returned to the throne.¹²³ There was no need to exert himself to try and change what he could not change.

Even if we accept that Khusrau was able to rewrite history to such a degree as to fool all of the Arab historians writing centuries later, it would seem that he did not do a very good job. While manipulation from Mazdak would mitigate Kavad's decisions, he would still appear foolish. Moreover, there is little in the portrayal of Mazdak to indicate that we are intended to view him as the cause – the focus in al-Tabari's account remains on Kavad throughout with Mazdak presented as the fount of the doctrines only.¹²⁴ If Khusrau had been trying to restore his father's reputation, why did he not remove the entire incident entirely? It would have been simpler and more effective than inventing a heresiarch to add to the story.¹²⁵

¹²³ Procopius *Wars* I.6.19.

¹²⁴ Al-Tabari 886.

¹²⁵ Crone 1990: 21-23.

This still does not explain the absence of Mazdak from the Byzantine sources, such as Procopius. Here, there are three immediately obvious theories. One, and the least satisfactory in many ways, is that Procopius' source was inaccurate and thus he heard a garbled version of events that skipped over Mazdak's role. The second, similar to the first, is that his source was deliberately inaccurate, perhaps a Mazdakite or other opponent of Kavad, and blamed the king for everything. Finally, and the most probable in many ways, is that Procopius and the others chose not to include Mazdak in their history. For example, Procopius was most interested in the story of the Prison of Oblivion, the escape of Kavad from it, and his return to power at the head of a Hephthalite army.¹²⁶ Fitting an obscure Persian heresiarch into the story, whom many of his readers might never have heard of, would detract from the purity of the tale that he expounded and the moral behind it, an important moment to remember the moral value attached to the writing of history in Graeco-Roman culture. The way it is presented at the moment, it follows the archetype of the ruler who made mistakes when he was younger, paid for them, and then returned to rule wisely and well, and can be seen as a cautionary tale on the exuberance of youth when applied to politics as well as an interesting tale of Persian customs and a good adventure story. Quite simply, to add Mazdak into this would have needlessly complicated matters for the writer. The simplest solution is perhaps to assume a combination of the above factors.

Now, it is also important to consider why Kavad would have chosen to embrace such an ideology in the first place. After all, most accounts list either reallocation of women or property or both as virtues of the Mazdakite sect, which is why it was

¹²⁶ Procopius *Wars* I.5.

considered such a danger by the nobility, for such redistribution would have threatened their status as well as threatening to undermine the concept of hereditary nobility in general, given that at least one source claimed that fathers would no longer know their own sons. If this were true, and there is almost certainly historical bias and propaganda to take into account, the Sassanid state as it existed at the time would have been shattered or changed irrevocably. However, those aspects of the sect would seem to threaten the power of the king as well, because he depended on the ability to present land or other property to nobles as a gift to retain or gain their allegiance and thus gain access to their soldiers. Without the nobility, Kavad would lose his own power. However, this need not be inexplicable. It is impossible to rule out sincere belief in at least some of the teachings of Mazdak and there are also other potential explanations as noted below.

Another possibility is that he intended to use the sect as a balancing act against the traditional nobility and priesthood, as Khusrau II later used Christians. Generally, the *Shahanshah* can be seen to balance the two groups against the other, favouring one to ensure his own ascendance. This can be seen in, for example, the favour shown to Kartir, the *Mobedan Mobed*, during the reigns of Bahram I and II or to the priesthood in the reign of Shapur II.¹²⁷ Equally though, other kings preferred to rely on groups within the state that were entirely dependent on them for protection, such as Jews or other outsiders. Already mentioned is Khusrau II's choice to use Christians,¹²⁸ but Shapur I seems to have considered the newly born Manichaean sect, and records of the period find Mani himself at court at times.¹²⁹ In short, to

¹²⁷ As noted above.

¹²⁸ *Khuzistan Chronicle* from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.229-237.

¹²⁹ *Kephalaia* XIV.3-XVI.2 from *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* p.74-75.

retain their ascendance, the King of Kings would balance the various groups one against the other, and we might see Kavad's actions in this tradition – seeking a third option.

A third option links in more to Zoroastrian traditions. A hallmark of the Sassanid dynasty was a claim to be restoring the past Achaemenid Empire after the long interregnum of first the Greeks and then the Parthians, who were not true Persians. This included claims to be restoring the Zoroastrian faith and church to an older, purer version. Although it is difficult to tell from the extant sources, this may have been the case with Mazdak and his followers. If this were so, Kavad may have viewed this as a stance likely to be popular with the priests at the least, because he was following the traditional line. However, the rise of Mazdak would have been against the priests' interests for two reasons. First, it almost certainly barred them from being particularly close to Kavad. And then there was the ideology that the Mazdakite sect stood for – allegedly a communistic approach to property and women. Given that the priests derived most of their own power and not-inconsiderable influence from the system as it was, it is perhaps unsurprising that the political backlash may have exceeded the expectations of Kavad.

Further, there is another potential aspect to the Mazdakite problem. Kavad's son and heir, Khusrau, has become known for the changes that he made to the Sassanid state, concentrating more power in his own hands by reducing the dependence of the *Shahanshah* on the nobility to raise an army, although the evidence for this is slender.¹³⁰ It could be, therefore, that Kavad had intended to use the Mazdakites in

¹³⁰ Al-Tabari 894, 896-898, 960-965.

an attempt to do much the same, either by directly using Mazdak and his followers to bypass the nobility or by creating a plausible internal enemy to draw attention from his own plans for the future of the state, and this is the scenario envisaged by Noldeke.¹³¹ It should be noted, as pointed out above, that Khusrau I is supposed to have only made his own attempt after consolidating his personal prestige, first by the slaughter of the Mazdakites and then by waging a successful war against Byzantium. Equally, Kavad had laid the groundwork for some of this in the later part of his reign, and with prestige and precedent he would have been able to force through the reforms against any resistance that the nobility offered. Further, the reforms are suggested to have offered rewards to the nobles, placing the burden of paying soldiers on the state as well as that of equipping them while simultaneously offering more nobles the opportunity to command armies with the attendant chances at pillaging enemy cities.¹³² No such opportunity would have been immediately obvious in the promotion of the Mazdakites by Kavad.

Garsoian noted in her article on Byzantium and Sassanid Persia that the source of inspiration for Sassanid change was Byzantium, their greatest enemy and the most obvious model to choose given the time that had passed since the time of the Achaemenids, the dynasty that the Sassanids claimed as exemplars, and the difference between the situations faced by the two.¹³³ The Byzantine rulers had absolute power within their own empire, with the nobility dependant on the emperor for their power. Contrast this to the Sassanid Empire, where the *Shahanshah* was himself dependant on his nobles for power and the desire to adopt a system closer to that of the Byzantines, even if only in this one area, becomes clear. Now, as

¹³¹ Noldeke 1879: 455-67.

¹³² Al-Tabari 894 and 897-8.

¹³³ Garsoian 1983: 568.

indicated elsewhere, the nobles were hardly likely to simply abdicate their authority and give it to the king. One major strand of the authority of the Byzantine emperors was their position as the vice-regent of God on Earth and the support of the Christian Church, which had resulted primarily from the protection and influence of Emperors such as Constantine the Great and Theodosius. With this example in mind, Kavad may have considered that it would be to his advantage to find himself a similar position. The Zoroastrian church, as it stood, would not have served in quite the same way – after all, it had now been in existence for over two centuries and it had lost whatever revolutionary spirit it might have ever had. As noted, part of the reason that the priests supported the coup d'état was that they did not wish to lose their own privileges acquired from earlier monarchs. Instead, Kavad may have turned to the Mazdakites, a younger sect, descended from Zarathustra's own teachings and thus still acceptably close to the state religion. However, as a younger sect and without the support held by the older religion, they would be dependent upon the protection of Kavad and thus more likely to support him unconditionally. This, in combination with the potential wealth to be obtained from the change over, might have allowed Kavad to push through the reforms that Khusrau eventually did, reforms that gave the centre of the state more power – exactly as in the Byzantine Empire. There is evidence moreover from al-Tabari and other sources that Kavad had in fact begun the administrative reforms that Khusrau was eventually supposed to have carried to fruition at the end of his reign.¹³⁴ The reforms and the evidence for them will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

¹³⁴ Al-Tabari 888.

Equally, Kavād seems to have been relatively young when he came to the throne, as he ruled (excepting the interval of 496-9) until 531, which means that he was at least in his forties when he died, and probably older given that al-Tabari notes that he died of old age.¹³⁵ While unlikely to have been as young as Shapur II, who was supposed to have been crowned before he was born and certainly needed a regent for some years,¹³⁶ Kavād is also unlikely to have been in the position of Ardashir I or Shapur I, both of whom had had experience of government prior to becoming king and certainly had impressive records of campaigns against the Romans behind them. Instead, he may have been old enough to assert himself, but without the background to impress the nobility or the experience to know how far he could push his subjects before there was a backlash.

Interestingly, the incident with Kavād seems to have been an exception, possibly the one that proves the rule, in that both the nobility and the priesthood cooperated in deposing a king. It is unusual enough in Sassanid history for a ruling *Shahanshah* to be removed as opposed to being denied the throne or having it usurped, as happened to Khusrau II, but this is the only one where both the nobility and the priesthood are explicitly noted as cooperating against the *Shahanshah*. This itself shows the degree to which both groups felt threatened by the actions of Kavād and how far he had alienated the two groups on which his throne depended. A king needed the nobles to support his reign and to provide soldiers to make war. He needed the priests to provide the moral support and to prove that his reign was sanctioned by the god Ohrmazd. Equally, most kings seem to have favoured one group over the other to keep them in balance. This also meant that, if the interests of one group were

¹³⁵ Al-Tabari 888.

¹³⁶ Agathias IV.25.2-3 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* p. 143.

threatened, they could not revolt by themselves. Even if all of the disparate nobles of the vast Sassanid Empire somehow made common cause, without the support of the priests, it is unlikely that any of them could be regarded as a legitimate king. But without the nobles, the priests lacked the military might to actually remove the king. Hence the need for a balance between them.

At this point, it is almost impossible that the conspiracy, for that is what it was, to remove Kavad was a monolithic block comprised of all the nobles and priests - whatever the view presented in the sources. There were, of course, the Mazdakite nobles already mentioned, and it is likely that the doctrine had its supporters amongst the priests as well. In fact, the description by al-Tabari almost suggests that the group that actively removed Kavad was a minority among the higher-ranking Persians.¹³⁷ This, of course, does not mean that his removal was not tacitly supported by the silent majority, for there was no attempt to return him to power or at least none that were recorded.¹³⁸ However, even with the priests supporting the decision, it is unlikely that every noble was comfortable with the idea of removing Kavad. He was, after all, portrayed as the chosen of the Zoroastrian god and, as later history has shown, such titles can have a powerful effect on what a noble is prepared to accept. Moreover, our sources are unclear on the exact timeline of the association between Kavad and Mazdak as well as the extent of it. Due to this uncertainty, we cannot say how much of the doctrine of the Mazdakites had been implemented in the law of the state, or how far Kavad intended to go with it. The revolt may have been, as Procopius implied, a direct result of a law written by Kavad to which the nobles

¹³⁷ Al-Tabari 886.

¹³⁸ At least not in the surviving sources – Procopius and al-Tabari imply that all of Kavad's supporters went with him into temporary exile.

involved objected.¹³⁹ Alternatively, they may have decided that the future of the state was not secure with Kavād at the helm and chosen to make a pre-emptive strike. It may have been a combination of the two – there is simply no way to be sure given the gaps and outright contradictions that litter the extant sources.

Before concluding, there is one last element to the reign of Kavād that deserves discussion – the Persian noble Seoses. It was he who engineered the escape of Kavād from Persia to the territory of the Hephthalites and remained with him there.¹⁴⁰ After his return from exile, Kavād made him *adrastadaran salanes*, apparently the first and only holder of this office which placed him ‘in authority over all magistrates and over the whole army’.¹⁴¹ Theophylact stated that ‘Kabades measured out for Seoses the recompense for the bond of friendship and decorated him with the most pre-eminent offices’.¹⁴² Unfortunately for Seoses, his good fortune did not last. He was sent by Kavād to negotiate the adoption of Khusrau by the Emperor Justinian and to ‘arrange a settlement’.¹⁴³ This mission was unsuccessful, and his fellow ambassador Mebodes, ‘who held the office of *magister*’¹⁴⁴, reported to Kavād that it had been Seoses who caused the failure of the negotiations. As a result, Seoses was placed on trial and condemned by the council. The most interesting part of the account is this:¹⁴⁵

The judges therefore condemned the man to death, while Cabades, though seeming to be deeply moved with sympathy as a friend of Seoses, was by no

¹³⁹ Procopius *Wars* I.5.1-2.

¹⁴⁰ Procopius *Wars* I.6.4-10.

¹⁴¹ Procopius *Wars* I.6.18-19.

¹⁴² Theophylact IV.6.11.

¹⁴³ Procopius *Wars* I.11.23-24.

¹⁴⁴ Procopius *Wars* I.11.26.

¹⁴⁵ Procopius *Wars* I.11.36-37.

means willing to rescue him. He did not, on the other hand, make it known that he was angry with him, but, as he said, he was not willing to undo the laws of the Persians, although he owed the man the price of his life, since Seoses was chiefly responsible both for the fact that he was alive and also that he was king. Thus, then, Seoses was condemned and was removed from among men.

This demonstrates two points to historians. The first is that, however much power he may have had theoretically, Kavad was unwilling to risk overruling the will of the council even for the man who had been loyal to him through his exile and who is portrayed as the victim of palace intrigue. It is no surprise that this is evidence of how much the *Shahanshah* depended on the balance being kept – at this time in his reign, Kavad had nowhere else to turn other than to his nobles. It would have been foolish to anger them over one man, and so Seoses was condemned. One must wonder how he regarded Kavad's decision. On the other hand, this story also proved how far the nobles were dependent upon the king. Seoses rose to his position purely by the whim of Kavad, and he was given powers unprecedented in Persian history. As noted above, it was the envy of the other nobles for his power that condemned him.¹⁴⁶

To conclude, there is much conjecture about the Mazdakite sect, its aims, doctrines, its place in Persian history, its fate and even its founder, let alone what it can tell us as historians about the relation between the king and his nobles at the end of the fifth century. However, as shown above, there are a number of different threads that can

¹⁴⁶ Procopius *Wars* I.11.32-33.

be teased out from the narrative as we have it, even with the conflicting and outright contradictory nature of the evidence to hand. This is a common problem with Sassanid historiography in general as most of the sources are either written after the Muslim conquest of the area or by Romans and Byzantines whose view of the Persian state was distorted both by the enmity between the two major powers and by the difficulty in getting reliable and up-to-date news about the internal affairs of the Sassanid Empire. It is probable that Sassanid writers, should there have been any, would have shown a similar incomprehension about the Romans. It was simply a side effect of the difficulties presented by distance and the cultural divide.

In relation to the power structures of Sassanid Persia, this is an excellent example of what Khusrau's later reforms are assumed to have been intended to prevent. After all, here we have a King of Kings removed from his throne by his own nobles and thrown into prison. He escapes only to need the assistance of an outside force to reclaim his throne. A similar incident marked the beginning of the reign of Khusrau II, who needed the assistance of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice to reclaim his power. Regardless, it is possible that it was this incident that indicated the need for major reforms quickly. If the nobles could overthrow a ruler because they did not like his policies, that would set the path open for anarchy and, as can be seen from events after the reign of Khusrau II, that left the empire open to external attack from all sides. Most importantly, it shows us as historians that the relationship between the king and his nobles was crucial in this period to the success of the state. While this is an extreme example of what could happen if the nobility were displeased, it is demonstrative of the fact that they had the means to display their displeasure with a given ruler in a manner that had an effect without tearing the state apart in civil war.

This decentralised nature of the state was both an advantage and a disadvantage to the kings as it allowed them to survive without a ruinously expensive bureaucracy to run an equally expensive army, but it forced them to rely on nobles who were, in the final analysis, unreliable although they also depended upon the king to adjudicate disputes and to allocate power between them. The subject of the next chapter will be to examine the reforms of Khusrau I, often touted as his final solution to the problem of the nobility.

C H A P T E R T W O

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The reign of Khusrau I

Khusrau I, also known as *Anurshirvan* or ‘Of the Immortal Soul’, reigned as *Shahanshah* of Sassanid Persia from 531 to 579. His reign was widely regarded by both the extant sources and many historians as the golden age of the Sassanid dynasty, when it reached its peak in almost every field – in particular the culture and the military. He led armies to victory against Byzantium. However, he is best remembered, ironically, for the part of his reign about which we know the least – a series of reforms that he supposedly made to almost every aspect of the Persian Empire at some point during his reign.¹⁴⁷ There is little evidence for them, as I will demonstrate, and what little there is does not necessarily allow for a detailed picture. It is necessary to speculate and, because of this, scholars such as Ze’ev Rubin or Richard Frye have built the reforms into the defining aspect of his reign, based on evidence that is flimsy at best.

As such, this question is important because it cuts to the core of the sixth century history of Persia. Was Khusrau I a king who changed things and innovated or was he looking to the past? What were his intentions for any reforms he may have made? Was the impact of those reforms as great as has sometimes been presented? With the limited evidence that has survived, it is impossible for anyone to be certain what the exact intentions of Khusrau were, or the tangible impact or otherwise that they had on Persia. Conversely, it may be questioned whether the reforms were important or if they even happened in the way that the traditional view has presented. In this

¹⁴⁷ Rubin 1995: 227.

presentation, I hope to examine the evidence for the reforms and the lack of it before dealing with that very question.

The reforms of Khusrau I *Anurshirvan* are often presented as being one of the most important events in sixth century Persia despite the paucity of sources that record them, both at the time and from later periods. Indeed, the only source to record these events at length was al-Tabari, although other Muslim writers have commented on certain aspects. In more contemporary accounts, the only evidence comes from a seemingly offhand comment by Procopius that Khusrau was ‘strangely fond of innovations’¹⁴⁸ and even this does not tell us much without any clarification of the innovations of which he was supposedly fond. Furthermore, while it is true that Procopius had some opportunity to learn of Persian internal affairs during his time as the secretary of Belisarius, the way he presented the remark is telling – he gave no evidence or reason for it, leaving it hanging, and thus apparently merely a rumour rather than something he viewed as particularly important. There is the possibility that he did not view the changes supposedly made as worthy of inclusion, but that is as damaging to a case made by Ghirshman or Frye as any suggestion that the reforms were not all that they have been made to be. In any event, Procopius did not see fit to expand upon his statement, and thus it can be dismissed with a note that Khusrau may have been known as an innovator even in his own time.

Thus, to analyse the reforms, to determine their content and their effect, if any, upon the Sassanid realm of the mid to late sixth century, it is necessary to turn to al-Tabari, who alone of our sources preserves what may be a list of the reforms

¹⁴⁸ Procopius *History of the Wars* I.23.1.

undertaken during Khusrau's reign. These, as can be seen from the evidence that has survived, encompassed many different aspects of government, from the legal to the military and from the fiscal to the religious. Some elements seem to be intended to reflect back upon the golden age of the first Sassanid rulers, others to be entirely new and arising from Khusrau's own mind. All need to be examined individually, as well as together, as parts of what has often been seen as a cohesive whole in terms of both the source and the presentation by modern writers. The lack of adequate contemporary material, which is particularly acute here even for the ancient world, prevents any attempt to come to a definitive conclusion, and so it is left to the individual historian to determine how to view this period and what conclusions to reach about the reforms.

As a final note, while there is no other direct evidence regarding the reforms, it is possible to use other sources to come to indirect conclusions about the reforms and the effectiveness thereof. In particular, this applies to the areas of the reforms concerning the military, where the Byzantine accounts of battles both before and after can be of great use. This is also true of the financial aspect, although not to the same degree. Contemporary evidence about the religion or legal system of the Sassanid Empire is extremely limited even from indirect sources.

The aspect that is most often cited when discussing the reforms, as well as the one most often given as the driving force, is the changes made to the Persian army – the way it was raised, trained and equipped.

Before Kisra became king, the office of Isbahbadh – that is, the supreme commander of the armed forces – was held by one man, who was responsible for this supreme command over all the land. Kisra now divided this office and rank between four Isbahbadhs, namely, the Isbahbadh of the East, comprising Khurasan and its adjoining regions; the Isbahbadh of the West; the Isbahbadh of Nimruz, that is, the land of Yemen; and the Isbahbadh of Azerbaijan and its adjoining regions, that is, the Khazar lands. He saw in this new arrangement a way of improving the good ordering of his kingdom. He strengthened the fighting quality of the soldiers with weapons and mounts.¹⁴⁹

He made enquiries about the cavalymen of the army, and those lacking in resources he brought up to standard by allocating to them horses and equipment, and earmarked for them adequate financial allowances.¹⁵⁰

These are the two key passages that have bearing upon the military reforms, although aspects of the tax changes also affected the army indirectly, through provision of food. Here, we can see the three primary changes that are attributed to him: the division of what had previously been a single supreme command into four separate areas, each under the authority of a *Spahbad*, the increase in the quality of his soldiers, and the equipping of the cavalry (*al-asawirah*) as well as providing them with money.

Often, the interpretation of this has been that Khusrau I instituted a standing army for the Sassanids. There are a number of problems with this interpretation, even

¹⁴⁹ Al-Tabari 894.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Tabari 897.

allowing for Rubin's suggestion that such a system could not have outlived its creator.¹⁵¹ First of all, there is no noticeable decrease in the time that it takes the Sassanids to raise armies before and after the reforms. In particular, Evagrius noted in his account of the events of 573 that the Persians, despite having been forewarned of the Byzantine intentions, were not ready for the attack and that Khusrau was still assembling his own army when the Romans struck.¹⁵² Furthermore, there are no indications of a noticeable increase in the fighting abilities of the Sassanid army – they win and lose battles in the campaigns of the early sixth century and in those of the later years.¹⁵³ If there were substantial changes to the formations, the appearance, the tactics or the ability of the Persian forces in this period, we might well expect there to be comments on it in the Byzantine sources, given that there were plenty of opportunities for the writers of the period to note the changes as they occurred and to comment on them. This century also has a high proportion of extant sources, such as Procopius and the *Strategikon* of Maurice, that we might reasonably expect to note changes. And yet, neither of them commented on any changes in the Persian order of battle, nor on the ability of their soldiers. Procopius was easily in a position to see such changes, given that his history covers two conflicts with the Persians, and the *Strategikon* specifically agrees with older texts that the Persian army's main weapon was the bow, both used by the infantry and the heavy cavalry.¹⁵⁴ Finally, there is no reason to assume that there was not already a standing army of sorts dating back to the earlier years of the dynasty. The Sassanids held several cities on the border with

¹⁵¹ Rubin 2000: 656-7.

¹⁵² Evagrius V.8-9 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.142.

¹⁵³ Procopius *Wars* I.13.12-I.14.55 on Dara and I.18 on Callinicum. Theophylact III.10.4-7 on Sargathon and III.15.8 on the Roman defeat in Armenia.

¹⁵⁴ Maurice *Strategikon* XI.1.

Byzantine territory including Nisibis and Singara.¹⁵⁵ These would have had garrisons, as would other fortresses along the border. Evidence for this can be gathered from Ammianus' account of Julian's campaign in Persia, particularly in the early phases.¹⁵⁶ Further, by this point, the Persians had constructed fortifications in the Caspian Gates to defend against incursions by northern tribes¹⁵⁷ and this would also have required a garrison on more or less permanent assignment.¹⁵⁸ Admittedly, this would have probably consisted of archers and other infantry, supported perhaps by light cavalry patrols and a commander chosen from the *dehqans*, as the heavier *kataphraktoi* or *clibanarii* would have been of little use in a siege or in the mountain passes. However, there is no way to be certain about the composition, nor is it particularly important. The fact is that there were substantial forces deployed in cities and fortifications along the western and northern borders of the kingdom, and possibly on the eastern and southern frontiers as well, although the lack of information about these makes it harder to be certain. Given that this is true, there is no reason to assume that Khusrau's military reforms were particularly innovative. They read more like an attempt to rebuild an army that has suffered from a sustained period of fighting and needed to be reformed and rebuilt.

The exception to all of this, of course, is the change in the command structure. Here again, we are unfortunately left unclear on the precise duties of a *Spahbad*. Certainly they were military commanders, but how did they relate to the *marzbans* who governed provinces on the frontiers? We simply do not know. However, there is no

¹⁵⁵ Zosimus III.31.1-2 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.6.

¹⁵⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus XXIV.1-2.

¹⁵⁷ John Lydus *De Magistratibus* III.52-53 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.20-21.

¹⁵⁸ Blockley 1992: 50.

evidence that there is a difference between the army of Shapur II and that of Khusrau I and his successors in terms of the command structure. During the 363 campaign, there were several Persian armies that appeared in the western theatre – one was commanded by a member of the House of Suren¹⁵⁹ and another by one of the Mihran family.¹⁶⁰ Earlier, Ammianus named Tamsapor as the western commander, with authority to make peace in the absence of the king.¹⁶¹ Similarly, in the reign of Hormizd IV, the principal general was Bahram Chobin, who led armies in two of the main theatres, first in the east and then in the west.¹⁶² Another Persian general of the same era was Tamchosro, of whom it is written in Theophylact that he was ‘invested with the command of the Persian armies in Armenia’,¹⁶³ and after his death, he was succeeded by the Kardarigan.¹⁶⁴ Later, in the reign of Khusrau II, there were three forces in the field at times – one led by Shahrvaraz, one by Shahin Patsgospan, and the third led by Rhahzadh.¹⁶⁵ At no point did the king himself lead a major army in battle, although Khusrau II did act as a nominal head for campaigns that required the royal presence, such as those initiating the war against Byzantium in 602.¹⁶⁶ Finally, during the reign of Yazdgird III, the forces on the southern frontier were initially led by Bahman at the Battle of the Bridge, while the regent Rustam remained in Ctesiphon with the *Shahanshah*.¹⁶⁷

¹⁵⁹ Ammianus 24.2.

¹⁶⁰ Ammianus 25.1.

¹⁶¹ Ammianus 16.9.

¹⁶² Theophylact III.6.7-7.19.

¹⁶³ Theophylact III.15.12.

¹⁶⁴ Theophylact I.9.5. Also see Sebeos 70-71 for other Persian *marzbans* and commanders in Armenia.

¹⁶⁵ Al-Tabari 1007, *Chronicon Pascale* 707.1-709.24 (from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.194-195), Theophanes A.M. 6118.

¹⁶⁶ Theophanes A.M. 6096.

¹⁶⁷ Al-Tabari 2176-2177.

On the other hand, given the lack of information regarding the precise details of Persian ranks and of who had which rank, it is not impossible that the only change was that from the king leading his armies in the field to generals doing it for him. As can be seen from Whitby's article on the subject, there is evidence that a reform was instituted by Khusrau I that placed restrictions on the campaigning practices of the Persian king.¹⁶⁸ This is not mentioned in al-Tabari's account of his reign, instead only appearing in the accounts of John of Ephesus,¹⁶⁹ Theophylact¹⁷⁰ and Evagrius.¹⁷¹ Despite this, Whitby makes a convincing case for accepting that this law existed but it has not traditionally been included in the corpus of laws ascribed to Khusrau I by scholars such as Frye or Ghirshman presumably due to it not being included in the Arabic tradition.¹⁷² However, while it may not belong to the same period of his reign as the other changes, a claim that is impossible to substantiate due to the lack of any reliable method of dating them, it certainly ought in my opinion to be included with the greater number of changes that Khusrau made to the Persian laws.

With that established, the key to this law is that the evidence for it, as shown above, is contemporary to the period, and the effect can be seen in the decades following the date it was supposedly introduced. After all, following Khusrau I, no Sassanid *Shahanshah* led an army to war in person, with the exception of Khusrau II who was present on four occasions but does not seem to have commanded in practice.

¹⁶⁸ Whitby 1994: 227-259.

¹⁶⁹ John of Ephesus *HE* VI.9 referenced in Whitby 1994:228

¹⁷⁰ Theophylact III.14.11.

¹⁷¹ Evagrius V.15 referenced in Whitby 1994: 228.

¹⁷² Frye 1983: 153-154.

One assumption made by Frye is that the military reforms left the interior of Persia undefended because the soldiers were concentrated on the frontiers, referencing the Arab conquests as an example.¹⁷³ This may have been true in times of war, but given the series of battles fought by the Muslims during their invasion, there is no evidence that this was any truer after Khusrau's reforms than it was before. While the permanent garrisons were all on the borders, the interior of Persia had always been reliant upon armies raised by the king to defend it, with the exceptions of those places with their own defenders. During the Islamic invasions, large numbers of Persian soldiers had already been killed or captured earlier in the campaign and thus were not available to the commanders defending Ctesiphon and other such places. This does not necessarily reflect an absolute lack of soldiers in the interior. In addition, the geography of the Sassanid state south of Ctesiphon left them with few potential defensive positions, unlike the Byzantine possessions in Syria, which may have contributed to the decision to place more soldiers there. It may also be true that Frye was basing his assumption on the campaigns of Heraclius inside Persian territory, but those are essentially a special case, as the bulk of the Persian armies were already deployed elsewhere and were unavailable to Khusrau II while the same was not normally true.

Another statement made by Frye is that 'the great nobles who had maintained private armies saw their power drastically reduced' based on the statements made by al-Tabari.¹⁷⁴ However, there are two major problems with this statement as written. The first is that there is no evidence that the great nobles suffered any loss of influence or power. Following the reforms, the major commanders of armies and important

¹⁷³ Frye 1983: 154.

¹⁷⁴ Frye 1983: 154

diplomats continued to be drawn from the powerful families such as the Suren and Mihran clans – examples include Bahram Chobin,¹⁷⁵ Shahin Patgospan,¹⁷⁶ or the anonymous Suren who participated in the negotiations recorded by Menander.¹⁷⁷ These families had previously been the traditional commanders of Persian armies and nothing seems to have changed after the reign of Khusrau I. In fact, with the movement from one high command position to four, there was increased opportunity for the higher nobility to achieve power and status. The other problem with this statement is that there is reason to believe the opposite. In the years after the reign of Khusrau I, almost every monarch was overthrown by his or her own nobility. Clearly, whatever the changes had been intended to implement, they were unsuccessful in taming the great families or even in limiting the danger that they posed to the *Shahanshah*. Indeed, the danger seems to have increased.

Finally, there is a tendency to overemphasise the changes made to the army, in one direction or another. Frye places the *dehqans* at the centre of the new army,¹⁷⁸ while Ghirshman has Khusrau raise a ‘peasant army’¹⁷⁹ and Rubin an elite standing army.¹⁸⁰ All that can be said for certain from the passages of al-Tabari is that Khusrau reequipped the cavalry and other soldiers, and provided them with ‘adequate financial allowances’,¹⁸¹ a wonderfully vague term, while Theophylact stated that Persians were only paid for foreign campaigns.¹⁸² In short, the modern interpretations of the reforms that are supposed to have seen a major change in the

¹⁷⁵ Theophylact III.18.10.

¹⁷⁶ Pourshariati 2008: 141.

¹⁷⁷ Menander Frag. 6.1 272.

¹⁷⁸ Frye 1983: 154.

¹⁷⁹ Ghirshman 1954: 344.

¹⁸⁰ Rubin 1995: 294.

¹⁸¹ Al-Tabari 897.

¹⁸² Theophylact III.15.4.

Sassanid army, in addition to being unsupported by contemporary evidence, are not supported in the primary source for the reforms themselves. Thus, while Khusrau clearly made some alterations to aspects of the military, it must be questioned whether these changes were as wide ranging or important as Frye or Ghirshman would believe. In fact, it would appear that the reforms to the military were minor and mostly concerned with aspects that are difficult to quantify such as the time taken to assemble the forces, the availability of weapons and their quality and other similar factors. What must be emphasised is that there is no basis for the reforms having any great effect on the ability of the Persian army to defeat its enemies or indeed any major changes to how it fought.

Aside from the military reforms, the two major classes into which it is possible to divide the reforms are the changes that Khusrau made to the legal system and the changes he made to the tax system.

When [the great men of state and the nobles] had concluded their speeches, he stood up and delivered an oration. He began by mentioning God's favours on His people when He had created them, and his own dependency on God for regulating their affairs and the provision of foodstuffs and the means of life for them. He left nothing [which ought to have been said] out of his oration. Then he told the people what they had suffered [through the spreading of Mazdak's teachings]; namely, the loss of their possessions, the destruction of their religion and the damage to their position regarding their children and their means of life. He further informed them that he was

looking into ways and means of putting all that right and rendering affairs strong again, and urged the people to aid him in this.

Next, he ordered the heads of the leaders of the Mazdakites to be chopped off and their possessions to be shared out among the poor and needy.¹⁸³ He killed a large number of those people who had confiscated other people's possessions, and restored these possessions to their original owners. He commanded that every child concerning whom there was dispute before him about his or her origin should be attributed to that person in whose family the child was, when the real father was not known, and that the child should be given a [legal] share in the estate of the man to whom the child was now attributed, providing that the latter acknowledged the child. In regard to every woman who had been forced to give herself unwillingly to a man, that man was held to be to account and compelled to pay the bride price to her so that her family was thereby satisfied. Then the woman was to be given the choice between remaining with him or marrying someone else, except that if she had an original husband, she was to be restored to him. He further commanded that every man who had caused harm to another person in regard to his possessions, or who had committed an act of oppression against another person, should make full restitution and then be punished in a manner appropriate to the enormity of his offence. He decreed that, where those responsible for the upbringing of the children of leading families had died, he himself would be responsible for them. He married the girls among them to

¹⁸³ Clearly at least some of the Mazdakites were rich in their own right – otherwise there would be little point in distributing their possessions. This also shows that Khusrau realised the importance of removing the base of the sect's support. Alternatively, it may be a later interpolation, part of the myths that accrued around Khusrau I in later years.

their social equals and provided them with their bridal outfit and necessities out of the state treasury; and he gave the youths in marriage to wives from noble families, presented them with money for dowries, awarded them sufficient riches, and ordained that they should be members of his court so that he might call upon them for filling various of his state offices.

He further ordained the digging of canals and the excavation of subterranean irrigation conduits, and provision of loans for the owners of agricultural lands and support for them. He likewise ordered the rebuilding of every wooden bridge or bridge of boats that had been destroyed and of every masonry bridge that had been smashed, and further ordered that every village that had fallen into ruin should be restored to a better state of prosperity than previously. He made enquiries about the cavalymen of the army, and those lacking in resources he brought up to standard by allocating to them horses and equipment, and earmarked for them adequate financial allowances. He assigned overseers for the fire temples and provided good roads for the people. Along the highways he built castles and towers. He selected [good] administrators, tax officials, and governors, and gave the persons appointed to these functions stringent orders. He set himself to peruse the conduct, the writings, and the legal decisions of Ardashir, and took them as a model to imitate, urging the people to do likewise.¹⁸⁴

This lengthy passage deals with both the changes that Khusrau made to the legal system and a number of more general changes he instituted that are not easily

¹⁸⁴ Al-Tabari 897-8.

catalogued elsewhere. These can be further divided into necessary responses to the suppression of the Mazdakites at the beginning of his reign, relating mostly to the re-establishment of laws regarding marriage and rape, and more general maintenance to the structure of the state. In the second category can be placed the repairs to bridges, canals and so on as well as the construction of new fortifications with their obvious advantages in military terms while the first provided equal opportunity to increase royal power through control of the next generation of nobility.

The obvious reason for the reforms, and one that is mentioned towards the beginning of the passage quoted above, is the destruction caused by the Mazdakite sect, which was finally destroyed by Khusrau at the start of his reign.¹⁸⁵ The leaders had their heads cut off, but sufficient damage had clearly been done to the social structures that there was a pressing need for repair. This is the key to the reforms of Khusrau I – the repair of the structures of society after a period of severe disruption. Innovation is not the goal here as can be seen from the appeal to the *Shahanshah* Ardashir I, founder of the dynasty, and the laws that he made.¹⁸⁶ It appears that there is an attempt here to link the changes made by Khusrau to the greatest of his forefathers, and while this may be nothing more than propaganda to justify his decisions, there is nothing in the text, barring a possibly apocryphal story about a scribe,¹⁸⁷ that would indicate sustained resistance to these proposals from any one group, whether in al-Tabari or in the more contemporary sources. Admittedly this is made extremely difficult by the lack of precise dating for the reforms, but the general assumption made by scholars is that they postdate the revolt of Khusrau's brothers in the 530s

¹⁸⁵ Al-Tabari 897 and *Shahnameh* p.683.

¹⁸⁶ Al-Tabari 898.

¹⁸⁷ Al-Tabari 961.

and come in the middle of his reign.¹⁸⁸ Of course, one may postulate that this is incorrect, and date the reforms to the earlier years, but the height of his authority as monarch makes far more sense as the prestige of the king would have been an important part of pressing these changes through to completion, regardless of whether there was sustained opposition or not. On the other hand, dating them to the middle of his reign raises the question of why there is a reference to the Mazdakites, who were seemingly reduced to insignificance at the beginning of his reign.¹⁸⁹

Due to the focus on the tax reforms and the military changes, the work that Khusrau I was responsible for in other fields often is glossed over or ignored.¹⁹⁰ It is perhaps understandable because of the lack of any material on this section of the reforms, except al-Tabari, and thus there is little to say about it. However, it should be noted that Khusrau I had a reputation in later years for being a just king and that some measure of legal reform may have been part of it.¹⁹¹ Other than that, there is little evidence either way. Some measure of change is probable, and likely to have represented a return to the older ways of Persian society at least in name following the chaos spread by the Mazdakites. This explains the changes to the law regarding marriage, rape and the disposition of children without parents.¹⁹² There must have been a method of dealing with similar cases previously, but this may have codified the existing laws. In all, this points to a resumption of old standards of government following a period when they were inactive, complete with an appeal to an older time.

¹⁸⁸ Frye 1983: 153.

¹⁸⁹ Yarshater 1983: 1001.

¹⁹⁰ Frye 1983: 154.

¹⁹¹ As indicated by his title – *Anurshirvan* meaning ‘of the Immortal Soul’. Al-Tabari 884 and *Shahnameh* p.684.

¹⁹² Al-Tabari 897-898.

The final part of Khusrau's reforms, and the best documented are those dealing with the tax system. Here is a part of what al-Tabari had to say about it:¹⁹³

The rulers of Persia before Kisra Anusharwan used to levy land tax on the administrative divisions, a third or quarter of fifth or sixth [of their produce], according to the water supply and the degree of cultivation; and poll tax according to a fixed sum. King Qubadh, son of Fayruz ordered, toward the end of his reign, a cadastral survey, comprising plains and mountains alike, so that the correct amount of land tax could be levied on the lands. This was carried out, except that Qubadh's death supervened before that survey could be completed. Hence when his son Kisra succeeded to power, he gave orders for it to be carried through to its end and for an enumeration to be made of date palms, olive trees, and heads. He then ordered his secretaries to calculate the grand total of that, and he issued a general summons to the people. He commanded the secretary responsible for the land tax to read out to them the total tax liabilities from the land and the numbers of date palms, olive trees, and heads. The secretary read all this out to them, after which Kisra said to them, "We have judged it advisable to establish the rates of taxation on the basis of what has been enumerated of the various *jaribs* of this cadastral survey – date palms, olive trees, and heads – and we ordain that the taxation should be paid in instalments spread over the year, in three instalments. In this way, sums of money will be stored in our treasuries so that, should any emergency arise along one of our vulnerable frontiers or on any one of our distant boundaries, a breach of the borders or anything else untoward, and we

¹⁹³ Al-Tabari 960-961.

have a need to deal with it and to nip it in the bud, involving the expenditure of money on this, we shall have money stored up here, ready and to hand, since we do not wish to have to levy a fresh instalment of taxation for that emergency. So what do you think about the procedure we have envisaged and agreed upon?”

This, then, would seem to be the most important part of the reforms undertaken by Khusrau – a fairly comprehensive survey and restructuring of the system by which the *Shahanshah* gained his revenue. The survey was apparently begun by Kavād in the last years of his reign but was not completed either, as al-Tabari said, because Kavād died or due to the war with Byzantium intervening.¹⁹⁴ Regardless, this was not completed until Khusrau’s reign, and this supposedly formed the basis for the reforms that he then undertook.

The key change that Khusrau seems to have made is that taxes were now collected three times a year as opposed to only once previously.¹⁹⁵ This was supposedly to ensure that the state always had money to hand in case of emergency, such as an invasion, which is the quoted example,¹⁹⁶ although it is questionable whether this would be any more efficient than the old system if this was the case. It should be noted that, despite the opinion of Rubin, there is no evidence that the Sassanid economy was dependent upon the tribute that the Byzantines provided.¹⁹⁷ As shown by Henning Börm, the quantities here were relatively small compared to the income of both governments and were more important for their propaganda value than their

¹⁹⁴ Al-Tabari 888.

¹⁹⁵ Howard-Johnston 1995: 215.

¹⁹⁶ Al-Tabari 961.

¹⁹⁷ Rubin 1995: 227-297.

financial assistance.¹⁹⁸ In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that Rubin's theory of a state with limited coinage is correct, nor that the reforms of Khusrau I were only a temporary measure that failed even during his lifetime.¹⁹⁹ This links strongly into the military aspects, as Rubin supported the idea of an elite professional force that could not be sustained in the face of increasing financial difficulties following the failure of the financial reforms.²⁰⁰ Howard-Johnston took a different approach, suggesting that al-Tabari gave us only a 'simplified picture of central elements of the reform'.²⁰¹ His conclusion was that, while the reforms were an 'important episode in the domestic history of the Sasanian empire',²⁰² it was not a 'fundamental restructuring of the fiscal or governmental system'.²⁰³ Al-Tabari did not comment on the success or failure of the reforms, but the evidence for any new professional force is lacking. In addition, Theophylact stated that 'Persians do not receive payments from the treasury, not even when they are assembled in their villages and fields'.²⁰⁴ The question must be asked then, if the king did not need to pay his soldiers under the traditional system and there was no new system, for what was the additional income needed to pay?

The obvious answer would be the other reforms that Khusrau undertook as noted above – rebuilding bridges and villages and refitting the cavalry.²⁰⁵ All of these reforms would have cost money and if we accept the portrayal that the previous system of taxing was inefficient compared to the new one, it may simply have been

¹⁹⁸ Böerm, H. Presentation at Oxford on Byzantine tribute to Persia. February 2008.

¹⁹⁹ Rubin 2000: 654-656.

²⁰⁰ Rubin 2000: 657.

²⁰¹ Howard-Johnston 1995: 215.

²⁰² Howard-Johnston 1995: 215.

²⁰³ Howard-Johnston 1995: 215.

²⁰⁴ Theophylact III.15.4.

²⁰⁵ Al-Tabari 894, 897-8 and 960-961.

that Khusrau needed the money in the short term to pay for the construction and other projects, but that he also wanted it for the long term so that the king would have more resources to hand. In addition, the article by Whitby noted that various units served in the Persian armies for pay – ‘either foreigners attracted into Persian service like the federates in Roman armies or internal mercenaries’.²⁰⁶ Considering the ongoing wars that consumed much of his reign, it is logical that Khusrau would have wanted access to larger numbers of mercenaries than previously had been the case and would have taken steps towards that end. He may also have wished to fill the treasury.

Equally, while it is unlikely that Khusrau founded a new elite professional force, it remains probable that there were Persian soldiers stationed in garrisons that required salary as well as money to maintain the fortifications and the arsenals in readiness for war. As stated previously, there is evidence for defensive positions on the frontier at locations such as Nisibis and Singara,²⁰⁷ as well as the fort of Biraparakh in the Caspian Gates.²⁰⁸ While an argument could be made that the troops stationed on the borders were not paid directly as stated in Theophylact,²⁰⁹ the suggestion in the account of John of Lydus that the Romans were meant to pay the Persians for the common defence rather than providing troops themselves suggests that the Persian garrison was indeed paid, soldiers that were certainly still present in 561 at least.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Whitby 1994: 254.

²⁰⁷ Zosimus III.31.1-2 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.6.

²⁰⁸ John Lydus III.52-53 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.20-21.

²⁰⁹ Theophylact III.15.4.

²¹⁰ Menander Frag. 6.1 314-319.

However, any suggestion that this tax system was intended to weaken the power of the nobles is undermined by al-Tabari:²¹¹

They imposed the poll tax on everyone except for people from noble families, great men, warriors, herbadhs, secretaries, and those in the king's service, and made them liable for it according to four levels, of twelve, eight, six and four dirhams according to the richness or poverty of the person in question.

Clearly, this merely reinforced the status of these groups as the elite of the empire, rather than in any way reducing their power. If Khusrau had truly intended to weaken their power, there were more effective methods with which to achieve his goal. For example, Honorius had attempted to curb the power of the Senate by taxing them. He had failed, but it was an attempt at least – 'Honorius had to rescind legislation aimed at extracting recruits from senatorial estates...'.²¹²

As I said, it seems unusual that a state should choose to take its revenue in three stages rather than one, particularly if we are to assume as al-Tabari indicated that this was an improvement. Under normal circumstances, this would have provided no extra funds, merely the same in three portions. Thus, it is hard to see why it would benefit Khusrau to do this. I have two suggestions, but both are only supposition. First, as noted in the passage above, the survey counted date palms, olive trees and heads for taxation.²¹³ This may have been the division, if there was a difference between the time when the olives and the dates were harvested of sufficient duration

²¹¹ Al-Tabari 962.

²¹² Whitby 2005: 366.

²¹³ Al-Tabari 960-961.

to allow for this. Alternatively, it is possible that it was done to allow for the harvest in different regions of the empire to be collected before it spoiled. It is impossible to be certain from what little we know. In addition, the text in al-Tabari does not mention grain, which was almost certainly the most common product of the empire. As such, the question of whether the passage on the tax section is complete must be asked, and the only answer can be that we do not know.

To conclude, there are many interpretations of the reforms of Khusrau I to be found, some of which place greater emphasis on certain aspects than others. My own opinion is that it is easy to place more importance upon these reforms than they truly merit. With the possible exception of the tax reforms, there appear to have been no extreme changes, nothing revolutionary. Contrary to the views of historians such as Christensen or Frye, the great nobles retained the bulk of their power after the reforms, even acquiring more due to the increased opportunities to command armies. The changes made to the legal system and the appeals to an older time seem to support a return to the days before the Mazdakites and the damage that their ideals may have inflicted upon the fabric of society. Khusrau's building programme would appear to be impressive but it was mostly concerned with repairing damaged bridges and roads, although he did construct new fortifications. Even the tax reforms seem designed primarily to support the efforts of the other changes, providing the revenue necessary to construct castles and to re-equip cavalry units.

The only reform that appears to be entirely new is the law that restricts the campaigning practices of the king. It is also the only one ascribed to Khusrau by a contemporary source and although it is not traditionally included in the corpus of

changes – it is not, for example, mentioned by Frye or Rubin – it deserves to be analysed as part of the programme of Khusrau I. Clearly he had a goal in mind – returning the country he ruled to the state that it had enjoyed under Ardashir I. There is little evidence, other than the law regarding the campaigns, that Khusrau was a great innovator, although he ought to be remembered as the king who presided over the golden age of the Sassanid empire.

CHAPTER THREE

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The Later Years: Hormizd IV to Yazdgird III

As with the earlier king, Kavad, Khusrau II encountered difficulties in establishing his rule over Sassanid Persia. His problems, however, stemmed from a different source and were not entirely of his own making. This case study provides an opportunity to examine the relations between a Sassanid king, who would take his empire to arguably the apogee of its power, and his nobles and soldiers at the beginning of his time in power.

The roots of the problem lay in the reign of his father, Hormizd IV. His great general, Bahram Chobin, had defeated the Turks and the Hephthalite Huns allied to them, and had then been sent to the west by the *Shahanshah* to face the Byzantine armies there. He had won his initial confrontation with them, but had then lost to a second army. Hormizd used this opportunity to try and belittle his overly proud subject, and apparently decided to send him a woman's clothes and a spindle.²¹⁴ The implication remains as clear today as it did then, and Bahram's response was to march on Ctesiphon. This is the version given by Theophylact.²¹⁵ Sebeos and the *Shahnameh*, however, do not record him being sent to the west at all, and date his rebellion to the aftermath of the battle against the Turks, the cause being that Hormizd was dissatisfied by the portion of the treasure sent to him by Bahram.²¹⁶ In either case, Hormizd had insulted Bahram, who retained the loyalty of his army and

²¹⁴ *Shahnameh* p.757-758.

²¹⁵ Theophylact III.8.1.

²¹⁶ Sebeos 74.

began to march towards the Persian capital, which seems to have been largely unprotected.

No effective resistance materialised. Instead, Hormizd was seized by his brothers-in-law, Bindoe and Bistam, who had him blinded before making their nephew, Khusrau II, the new *Shahanshah*.²¹⁷ All accounts feature the overthrow of Hormizd, noting also that, by this point, he had alienated nearly all of the nobility and the priests.²¹⁸ Certainly, no one is recorded as supporting his cause in the accounts, and he was simply left to linger once he had been removed from the throne, although the *Shahnameh* recorded that he was strangled by Bindoe and Bistam as they fled from Ctesiphon in the face of Bahram's army.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, nothing that Khusrau could say appeased Bahram, and he continued to approach.²²⁰ Accompanied by at least one and possibly both of his uncles,²²¹ Khusrau fled westwards to the Byzantine empire, reaching the city of Circesium in early 590²²² from where he wrote letters to the Emperor Maurice. This is recorded in both Theophylact and Sebeos. The version in Sebeos follows:²²³

Give me the throne and royal station of my fathers and ancestors; send me an army in support with which I may be able to defeat my enemy; and restore my kingdom; [then] I shall be your son. I shall give you the regions of Syria – all Aruastan as far as the city of Nisibis – and of Armenia the area of

²¹⁷ *Shahnameh* p.772.

²¹⁸ Sebeos 75.

²¹⁹ *Shahnameh* p.783.

²²⁰ Al-Tabari 997.

²²¹ Sebeos 79 implied that both uncles remain with Khusrau throughout his journey. Al-Tabari 999 had Bindoe captured by Bahram in assisting Khusrau to escape. Bindoe then escaped to Azerbaijan.

²²² Cited in Frye 2004: 164.

²²³ Sebeos 76.

Tanuter authority as far as Ayrarat and the city of Dvin, and up to the shore of the lake of Bznunik' and to Arestawan; and a great part of the land of Iberia, as far as the city of Tp'khis. Let us observe a pact of peace between us until the death of us both; and let this oath be secure between us and between our sons who will reign after us.

Theophylact had him send two messages,²²⁴ one urging 'the garrison of Martyropolis to surrender to the Romans'²²⁵ and one to the Emperor as in Sebeos asking for his help in restoring him to his throne. In return, he offered substantial concessions in territory and promised not to ask for subsidies in future.²²⁶ These were important concessions, and despite some apparent misgivings on the part of the Senate, Maurice decided to aid Khusrau.²²⁷ He sent the exiled king an army, and with this and the support of the Armenians and his kinsmen, Khusrau defeated Bahram and forced him to flee east to the Turks whom he had previously defeated.²²⁸

Following this, and the establishment of Khusrau as *Shahanshah*, he decided to execute his two uncles, Bindoe and Bistam, for the crime of murdering his father Hormizd.²²⁹ Bindoe was at court at the time, and was thus seized and killed, possibly drowned in the Tigris according to Theophylact,²³⁰ but Bistam was absent and thus was able to escape to the north where he maintained a resistance to his nephew for several years before finally being murdered by one of his allies (possibly a Turk²³¹),

²²⁴ Theophylact IV.12.9-13.1 and 13.2-26.

²²⁵ Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 172.

²²⁶ Theophylact IV.13.24.

²²⁷ Sebeos 76.

²²⁸ Al-Tabari, 1000; Sebeos 76-80.

²²⁹ Sebeos 94.

²³⁰ Theophylact V.15.1.

²³¹ *Khuzistan Chronicle* from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II: AD 363-630* p. 230.

at which point the rebellion faltered,²³² although the dating is still debated by historians.²³³ This seems to have marked the end of organised internal resistance to Khusrau II, although the focus in the sources from 602 is on the war with Byzantium rather than the internal situation in Persia.

From the above, there are a number of points that can be made about the relationship between the Sassanid *Shahanshahs* and their most powerful subjects, particularly in the wake of the reforms of Khusrau I. In addition, the importance of family is an important theme, and the necessity for the king to control his army is demonstrated.

To begin with, family and the ties that it brought were crucial to the pattern of events. The most important figures allied to Khusrau II during the first parts of his reign were his maternal uncles Bistam and Bindoe. They are noted as supporting him because their sister was the wife of Hormizd, and Bosworth speculated in his notes on al-Tabari that they were the sons of one of the nobles whom Hormizd IV killed early in his own rule,²³⁴ leading to their attempt to take revenge. Ironically it is this revenge that is the primary motivation behind their deaths at Khusrau's orders once he is secure on the throne.²³⁵ In addition, Bahram's closest advisor in al-Tabari's account seems to be his sister and wife, Kurdiyah.²³⁶

So, from the above list, it is clear that family members were tied together tightly, as Khusrau's uncles supported him against Bahram, but there may have been other

²³² Sebeos, Chapters 94-5 and 97; *Shahnameh* p.803-6.

²³³ Howard-Johnson on Sebeos and Bosworth on Tabari both list different dates, based on the interpretation of the available evidence.

²³⁴ Bosworth 1995: 303. note.

²³⁵ Sebeos 94.

²³⁶ Al-Tabari, 998.

reasons. While little is known about Hormizd's wife or wives, it is clear that Khusrau later had at least two wives, one being Shirin and another being the mother of Kavad-Shiroe.²³⁷ Another may have been Maria, named in the sources as the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Maurice, although the evidence for this is far from conclusive.²³⁸ In any case, while all the children of Khusrau II and other *Shahanshahs* would have had the same father, they may well have had different mothers. This would lead to a system where the position of a potential heir might depend more on his mother's favour with the king than his own merits. Thus, support would be derived more from the maternal family than the paternal, given that any brothers of the current king would be potential competitors for the crown rather than potential supporters as demonstrated by the late third century when three of the five kings directly following Shapur I were his sons – first Hormizd I, then Bahram I and finally Narses after Bahram II and III. Thus, given that the mother of Khusrau II was a member of one of the seven greatest Persian families,²³⁹ Khusrau would have derived support through this link as he represented an opportunity for that family to gain status, wealth and power through his patronage, whereas the reverse would potentially have been true under Bahram, who was a member of the Mihran family.²⁴⁰

There is one interesting and useful comparison to be drawn between the importance of the mother in Sassanid court politics and an earlier time. In particular the polygamous practices of the Hellenistic kings mirror it in many ways. In the courts

²³⁷ *Shahnameh* p.813.

²³⁸ The *Khuzistan Chronicle* lists 'Maria the Roman' as one of Khusrau's Christian wives, but says nothing about her parentage. Al-Tabari and the *Shahnameh* name her Mariam or Maryam and definitely state that she was Maurice's daughter. Sebeos does not mention her at all.

²³⁹ Sebeos 75.

²⁴⁰ Theophylact III.18.6.

of the Successor kingdoms, as Daniel Ogden discussed in his work *Polygamy, Prostitutes and Death*,²⁴¹ the lack of a defined structure of succession allowed the wives and courtesans who surrounded the king to play the key part in deciding who out of the many potential heirs would take his place. Fortunes could vary depending on which of the wives or concubines were in favour at any given point. This situation with competing children sharing the same father but different mothers is known as amphimetrisism. Ogden also noted, and these are also factors that apply to the Sassanids, that having many wives allowed the kings to minimise the risk of a particular queen being infertile and reduced the risk of all the children dying in childhood. This would have been important in this time, even in the more medically advanced east. Finally, the abundance of heirs allowed the king to have the medieval ‘heir and spare’ so that, should one die or be disqualified from taking the throne for any reason or simply be not suitable in his father’s opinion, there were other options. An example of this in Sassanid history is Khusrau I, who had two elder brothers. Kavad’s eldest son, Caoses, was passed over by his father because ‘he was by no means pleasing to [Kavad]’,²⁴² and his middle son Zames had lost an eye and thus was disqualified on the grounds of deformity.²⁴³ Interestingly Khusrau is specified in the account as the son of the sister of Aspebedes, who appears to have been a Persian noble of some importance given his other activities noted in Procopius.²⁴⁴ In both cases, he is specifically noted to be the uncle of Khusrau, but no indication is given of his relationship with either of the other sons, and the way Procopius described the connection strongly implies that he was not related to either Caoses or Zames: ‘But

²⁴¹ Ogden 1999.

²⁴² Procopius *History of the Wars* I.11.3.

²⁴³ Procopius *Wars* I.11.4.

²⁴⁴ Procopius *Wars* I.9.24 and I.21.4.

Chosroes, who was born to him by the sister of Aspebedes...'²⁴⁵ and 'Among these was Aspebedes, the brother of Chosroes' mother'.²⁴⁶

There is one other important aspect to the way that family was regarded in the sources. This was the way that the families to which the claimants belonged also played a part disproportionate to the direct support accrued through them. Khusrau, as the king and the heir of the Sassanid family, had a definite edge in this area over Bahram. Bahram instead was descended through the Mihran family, which was one of the seven great families, from the former Arsacid ruling house that had been overthrown three hundred years earlier by Ardashir I, who founded the Sassanid dynasty.²⁴⁷ Obviously, this allowed Khusrau to claim that he was the legitimate heir in his relations with Maurice, with none of the internal dynastic issues that a confrontation with a blood relation would have brought.²⁴⁸ However, Bahram may have asserted that his claim to the throne though the Arsacid family predated, and thus preceded, that of the Sassanid house. Certainly in a letter that Sebeos claimed he wrote to the Armenians, he stated 'so that you and I in unison might remove that universal scourge, the house of Sasan...'.²⁴⁹ There is no attempt here to draw a connection between the royal family and his own; instead he took a diametrically opposed position, setting himself up to be the champion of those whom the Sassanids did not represent. In the letter, for example, he promised the Armenians freedom from both empires, to give them their kingdom back.²⁵⁰ This was written before the battle in which Bahram was defeated, so it may have been simply a tactic

²⁴⁵ Procopius *Wars* I.11.5.

²⁴⁶ Procopius *Wars* I.23.6.

²⁴⁷ Theophylact III.18.6.

²⁴⁸ Theophylact IV.11.1.

²⁴⁹ Sebeos 77.

²⁵⁰ Sebeos 77-78.

to shift the support of the Armenians from Khusrau to himself, as he had tried before when he offered substantial territorial concessions to Maurice in return for Roman support.²⁵¹ In both cases, his proposal was refused - the Armenians perhaps believed either that he would not fulfil his promise once the war was over or that they would be able to get a better reward from Khusrau.²⁵² In fact, it might not have been seen to be in their best interests to have a separate Armenian state stranded between the two empires, as the nobles were able to wield more power in the service of the Persian *Shahanshah*, as seen in the career of Smbat Bagratuni, than if they had to rule their own country.

Besides the importance of family in noble power struggles, however, there was another important factor: one that was linked to the policies of Khusrau I. His reform of the army had left it partially funded by the state rather than the great nobles,²⁵³ which has been interpreted as reducing the dependency of the king on them when waging war.²⁵⁴ However, the commanders of the army were still nobles and the reign of Hormizd is an excellent demonstration of why there were still potentially very serious problems with the system.

Most of the sources, with the exception of al-Tabari who described Hormizd as ‘a successful and victorious commander...’,²⁵⁵ do not suggest that he participated in any campaigns, and in fact the implication in Sebeos is that Bahram (and presumably other commanders on other fronts) fought in his name throughout his reign. It is inexplicable that Hormizd made no effort to secure the allegiance of the other

²⁵¹ Theophylact IV.14.8.

²⁵² Sebeos 78-79.

²⁵³ Al-Tabari 897.

²⁵⁴ Frye 1983: 154.

²⁵⁵ Al-Tabari 990.

military commanders. It must be assumed from their lack of intervention in the events that saw Hormizd overthrown that they did not support him. Admittedly, the far eastern army would have been hard pressed to march west in time, but the fact that Khusrau II fled west would suggest that either he or his advisors did not consider their support strong enough to fight Bahram directly following the defection of the forces stationed at Nisibis²⁵⁶ and the failure of such troops as Khusrau had been able to rally to stop Bahram.²⁵⁷ Furthermore it would seem unusual, in a culture that seemed to prize its martial identity so highly,²⁵⁸ for a king not to go on at least one campaign, particularly as Hormizd was at war for all of his reign whether it was against the Byzantines or the Turks or both. The best explanation for this is the law recorded in differing forms by Theophylact, Evagrius, and John of Ephesus, limiting the campaigns which the *Shahanshah* commanded in person.

This would make the most sense, although it remains uncertain if the law existed as such, or whether it simply was a custom that acquired the weight of tradition. Regardless, as Whitby suggests, it may have come from a desire to maintain the personal prestige of the *Shahanshah*, as this was important to a ‘wide variety of activities, diplomatic negotiations, military confrontations, or ceremonial activities at court, and Persian kings were rightly jealous of their standing’,²⁵⁹ as were their Roman counterparts. As the son of Khusrau I, Hormizd would have been the most likely to observe this, whether it was a law or a tradition, which explains why he does not seem to have been a military commander at any point. In addition, he may

²⁵⁶ Theophylact IV.1.2.

²⁵⁷ Evagrius *HE* VI.17 referred to in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.172.

²⁵⁸ As can be seen in the tale of Bahram Chobin in the *Shahnameh* and various works of art including the rock reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and elsewhere.

²⁵⁹ Whitby 1994: 228.

not have been suited to it and decided that it was better to leave it to those with the skills to wage war effectively. This would have been a wise idea, if he had not allowed himself to become separated from his soldiers. The implication in Sebeos is that the soldiers were more loyal to Bahram than Hormizd because he was the one who had rewarded them with the treasure from the battle, whereas Hormizd apparently sent troops to seize the treasure, presumably in preparation to redistribute it:²⁶⁰

Now when King Ormizd saw the messengers who had come with the news, and had read the army's letter of greeting, and had received the gifts – the share of booty from the precious royal treasure – although he was outwardly joyful and humoured the men, yet inwardly he exclaimed in anger: "The feast is exceedingly grand, and I acknowledge the token of this portion. But from such great treasures it was not right to send to court [merely] this much."

Then instead of a letter of greeting he ordered a letter to be written in very angry terms, which he despatched by a company of auxiliaries and royal guards, with orders to go to the army and seize the whole treasure. They went and began to demand it. Then all the troops were galvanised.

While this would be consistent with Whitby's suggestion that the Sassanid dynasty prized their dignity and prestige above all,²⁶¹ and it is certainly possible that Hormizd viewed the distribution of the plunder by Bahram as both superseding his own authority and insulting him with a lesser amount than would be appropriate, the

²⁶⁰ Sebeos 74.

²⁶¹ Whitby 1994: 228.

sources do not suggest that Bahram had any plans to rebel before he was provoked by Hormizd.²⁶² It is important to be careful with the later sources, such as al-Tabari and the *Shahnameh* because of the later view of Bahram as a hero who fell from grace,²⁶³ but there is no suggestion of premeditation in the Roman or Armenian traditions either, who would have had nothing to gain from hiding it, and could have used it to prove the perfidy of the Persians. Thus, while Bahram may have sent Hormizd a lesser amount than the *Shahanshah* felt appropriate, it is probable that it was still the share that the king was entitled to from the plunder. A possible explanation may be found in the *Shahnameh*, which had Bahram taking some of the treasure for himself before sending the rest back to the court, but this is not mentioned in any of the other sources.²⁶⁴ In fact, the only consistent fact present is that Bahram was insulted by Hormizd in some fashion and he, with his army, revolted as a result.

Thus, while Hormizd may have been on campaign during the reign of his father, there is no record of him doing so in his own reign. He had essentially allowed the local commanders to come between him and his soldiers, which may have associated them more closely in the minds of the army with the rewards and victory than the distant king in Ctesiphon. While Hormizd still had at least some soldiers to hand, presumably his personal guard and other troops in or around Ctesiphon, Bahram was able to take the throne because he had the soldiers from the quarter of the army that he had commanded, whether that was the Byzantine frontier and the garrison of Nisibis or the eastern frontier and his army fresh from victory against the Turks.

²⁶² Sebeos 74.

²⁶³ *Shahnameh* p. 758.

²⁶⁴ *Shahnameh* p. 754.

There is one interesting fact about this part of the account. According to Theophylact, Bahram was defeated in battle by the Byzantines, which resulted in his dismissal by Hormizd.²⁶⁵ Further, he does not seem to have been in command of that army for long, potentially only a single campaign season or perhaps two. Thus, while he may have brought some soldiers with him from the east, the bulk of the army would not have known him for very long and their impressions would have been shaped by a single victory and a single defeat. This hardly seems to be the basis for an army willing to rebel against the rightful king for the sake of a general whom they barely knew, even one who must have had great personal charisma. If, on the other hand, Hormizd had threatened to discipline the entire army, or Bahram said that he had, that would be another matter. The garrison of Nisibis which joined Bahram was noted to be disaffected due to a recent defeat and afraid of punishment, so this might be the best explanation for the widespread revolt.²⁶⁶ In particular, Hormizd did not have the close links to the army that would be needed to counter its loyalty to the immediate commander.

Whatever the reason, this does not seem to have held true for Khusrau II once he took the throne. Al-Tabari²⁶⁷ and the *Shahnameh*²⁶⁸ recorded battles between Bahram and Khusrau before the latter fled to Byzantine territory, while Theophylact also recorded a military confrontation,²⁶⁹ and this means that he must have had a number of soldiers if the reports are true. Presumably it would have been comparable in size to that of Bahram if not in skill although neither source gives any specific details. Furthermore, Persian soldiers fought on his side along with the Byzantine

²⁶⁵ Theophylact III.8.1.

²⁶⁶ Theophylact IV.1.2.

²⁶⁷ Al-Tabari 994.

²⁶⁸ *Shahnameh* p.776.

²⁶⁹ Theophylact IV.9.1.

troops sent by Maurice and, as king, he was able to muster an army later to defeat the rebellion of Bistam. Admittedly his family connections were important in the first two cases, as Bistam and Bindoe provided at least 8,000 Persian cavalry for the later campaign according to Sebeos²⁷⁰ while al-Tabari wrote that ‘Binduyah and a man from the Isbahbadhs of that region called Mushil with forty thousand warriors met up with him there...’.²⁷¹ While some of those were certainly Armenians, there may have been a strong Persian complement as well, including the garrison of Nisibis and perhaps the other border fortresses.²⁷² Clearly, Khusrau was able to assemble significant numbers of soldiers.

One possible reason for this is that he had not managed to alienate the nobility and priests as his father had. Hormizd had, by the time that al-Tabari and the other Arabic authors were writing, acquired a reputation for favouring the common people at the expense of the nobility and priesthood – ‘he [Hormizd] was anxious to behave towards his subjects with justice but implacable against the great men of the kingdom, because of their oppressing the lowly folk’²⁷³ and ‘he provided well for the mass of troops, but deprived the cavalymen of resources’.²⁷⁴ By contrast, there is no suggestion in the sources that Khusrau had any particular problems with his nobility or that he favoured the common people over them. In contrast, the group he favoured, at least to begin with, were the Christians.

‘This cross I, Khusro, king of kings, son of Khusro (have sent). Because of the diabolic action and evil-doing of the most ill-fated Bahram Gushnasp and

²⁷⁰ Sebeos 79.

²⁷¹ Al-Tabari 1000.

²⁷² Theophylact IV.15.7.

²⁷³ Al-Tabari 989.

²⁷⁴ Al-Tabari 990.

the cavalrymen with him, we fled to Roman territory; and because the ill-fated Zatsparham came with an army to Nisibis to incite the cavalry of the district of Nisibis, we too sent cavalrymen with a commander to Charcha. And through the fortune of the all-holy and famous saint Sergius, since we had heard that he was the granter of petitions, in the first year of our reign, on 7th January, we petitioned that, if our cavalrymen should slay or capture Zatsparham, we would send a jewelled cross to his home. And on 9th February they brought the head of Zatsparham to us. Therefore, having granted our request, because each element was unambiguous, we sent to his all-holy name this cross, which had come into our possession, together with the cross sent by Justinian, emperor of the Romans, to his house, and which, in the time of the estrangement of our two states, had been brought here by Khusro, king of kings, son of Kavadh, our father, and was found among our treasures. (These crosses we have sent) to the house of the all-holy saint Sergius.’²⁷⁵

As the above shows, Khusrau had no problems with seeking help from any source open to him, although he seems personally to have remained a Zoroastrian. However, he had at least one Christian wife, Shirin who appears to have come from Khuzistan, as she is listed as an Aramaean in the *Khuzistan Chronicle*.²⁷⁶ Equally there are a number of other written sources that listed Khusrau as being a patron of St. Sergius’ shrine as well as various other donations that the *Shahanshah* made to

²⁷⁵ Evagrius HE VI.21 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.175-176.

²⁷⁶ Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 230.

Christian churches.²⁷⁷ Interestingly, these churches seem to have been outside the borders of the empire. This was in addition to the prominence of Christians at court,²⁷⁸ which was not limited to Shirin, and may have resulted from the good relations that Khusrau had with the Byzantine empire under Maurice. Regardless, this is likely to have played a part in the decision of the Armenians to back Khusrau rather than Bahram, and again there were Armenians who held high positions under Khusrau such as the aforementioned Smbat Bagratuni who was a *marzban* for eight years.²⁷⁹ There is no evidence for any revolt by the Persian nobility against Khusrau in this period, so this must have been balanced by the promotion of more traditional Persian nobility to equivalent positions that are simply not recorded.

To conclude, the situation that resulted in the overthrow of Hormizd IV was mostly a result of his own mistakes, particularly his alienation of the higher nobility and Bahram Chobin in particular. This led directly to his overthrow because he no longer had any significant hold over the levers of power in the Sassanid state. As in the case of Kavad and his dealing with the Mazdakite sect, a king could survive with the backing of one major power group, but not when all of them were opposed to him. Secondly, the reforms of Khusrau I had mitigated the reliance on the nobility for troops, but as the senior commanders were still noble by birth, the possibility existed that a commander would be able to do what Bahram did and turn them against the king whether by force of personality or because the king had failed to build the necessary bond with his soldiery. Hormizd failed on both counts.

²⁷⁷ Evagrius *HE* VI.21 (from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.175-176), Theophylact V.14.1-12 and al-Tabari 1000.

²⁷⁸ Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 233-234.

²⁷⁹ Sebeos 100.

It also shows the importance of family in the Sassanid power struggle. Khusrau II succeeded because he was able to capitalise on the advantage his relationship to Bindoe and Bistam lent him. This gave him the power base he needed to make himself a credible alternative to Bahram as opposed to a puppet of his uncles or other nobles. Equally, his decision, conscious or not, to marry a Christian and to make donations to churches may have secured the support of Armenia and it certainly cannot have had a negative effect upon the Byzantine decision, particularly in retrospect. Finally, the nobility cannot be said to have lost any power since the events of the reign of Kavad a century earlier. They were still capable of overthrowing their ruler, and their support was crucial to the eventual success of Khusrau II.

There is little to be said on the relations between Khusrau and his nobility for the bulk of his reign. Following the end of the rebellion led by Bistam, the sources are focussed on the war rather than affairs within Persia. While there is more evidence for the continued role of the nobility as commanders of the armies, it is not until the end of his reign that the details of the interactions become apparent. Khusrau II was perhaps the greatest of the Sassanid monarchs, if we are to measure greatness simply in terms of territory ruled. At the height of his power, his word was law from the plateau of Anatolia to the Indus River and as far south as Egypt. In less than twenty years, Persian armies had restored the borders of the Achaemenid Empire. But it was not to last, and the Persian nobility bore at least part of the responsibility.

Before turning to the end of Khusrau's reign, there was one significant member of the nobility who was particularly relevant to this discussion. His name was Smbat

Bagratuni, *marzban* of Vrkan²⁸⁰ and bearer of the title ‘Khosrov Shum’ or ‘joy of Khosrov’.²⁸¹ An Armenian formerly in the service of the Byzantine Emperor, he later rose high in the favour of Khusrau II presumably due to his success in battle, although Sebeos did not preserve the details. However, Sebeos was clear on the point that Smbat owed his position and power entirely to Khusrau:²⁸²

It happened at that time that Smbat Bagratuni became pleasing in the eyes of king Khosrov. He gave him the *marzpanate* of the land of Vrkan, made him prince over all that region, and favoured him even more with honours and authority. He heaped gold and silver on him, and robed him in expensive and splendid garments. He gave him the belt and sword that had belonged to his own father Ormizd. He put under his command Persian and Armenian troops, and ordered him to go to the land of his appointment.

From this evidence, it is to be understood that the *Shahanshah* retained control of the precise balance of power within the nobility. Those who were already members of the great houses perhaps had a safety net of sorts from their own estates, but the choice of who to appoint to *marzpanates* or to the command of soldiers remained in the hands of the king. As was evident a century earlier with the career of Seoses, it was possible for the king to reward his favourites so long as he did not threaten the interests of the nobility as a whole or of the principle factions at court, as shown by the overthrow of Kavad but also by that of Khusrau II.

²⁸⁰ Sebeos 96.

²⁸¹ Sebeos 101.

²⁸² Sebeos 96.

By 628, the war between the Byzantine and Persian empires had nearly come to an end. Despite conquering most of the Byzantine provinces east of the Hellespont, the Sassanids had failed to destroy the military now led by the Emperor Heraclius. Constantinople continued to hold out against the Persians' Avar allies and there were no signs that the Persians intended to take a direct hand in the siege.²⁸³ An enemy army led by Heraclius had entered the heart of Persian territory and defeated the forces sent against it. Only a single Sassanid army remained in the field, and it was to play no direct role in the ensuing events.²⁸⁴

Following the battle of Nineveh, Khusrau II fled from Dastagird back to Ctesiphon, which had not yet fallen into Byzantine hands.²⁸⁵ While there are some variations in the sources concerning the details of events after this, the picture as a whole remains quite clear. At least a part of the nobility led by or including Khusrau's son Kavad-Siroes overthrew the *Shahanshah* and then had him murdered along with his other sons. The variations are primarily in the motivation of the nobles, their leaders and the details of the coup and the death of Khusrau, and can broadly be traced to various historical traditions. For example, Theophanes and the *Chronicon Pascale* are in agreement in almost all respects while the accounts in Sebeos and al-Tabari vary. In only one respect do the other accounts seem to be preferable to Theophanes. This is the death of Khusrau. With the exception of Theophanes, who wrote that he was executed on the command of Kavad-Siroes with many arrows,²⁸⁶ the sources that record his death (the *Shahnameh*,²⁸⁷ the *Khuzistan Chronicle*²⁸⁸ and al-Tabari²⁸⁹)

²⁸³ Howard-Johnston 1995: 133.

²⁸⁴ Garthwaite 2005: 110.

²⁸⁵ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

²⁸⁶ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

²⁸⁷ *Shahnameh* p.825-826.

²⁸⁸ Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 236.

instead note that he was killed by a Persian named Mehr-Hormizd although his precise identity varies between them. Sebeos merely stated that Khusrau was killed at Kavad-Siroes' order but not the method²⁹⁰ and Movses Daskhuranst'i wrote that his head was removed by a sword, thus agreeing with al-Tabari and the others in all but the weapon used.²⁹¹ It would seem that the story involving Mehr-Hormizd is the most likely one – he appears in all but Sebeos and the Byzantine sources, and there is a degree of consistency between them that suggests they are at the least drawing on a common tradition. In addition, the Persian sources would have been in a better position than Theophanes to learn exactly how Khusrau died, and it is likely that the details were not passed along to Heraclius or to the source for the *Chronicon Pascale*. Finally, the emphasis in the Roman tradition is on how Khusrau was a wicked man, who had blasphemed against God and had been cast down because of it, thus adopting a traditional theme from Greek tragedy or the Bible.²⁹² Khusrau had been a great king and had grown overly proud which led him to hubris and caused him to commit terrible sins. As a result God, in the view of Theophanes and the *Chronicon Pascale*, had sent Heraclius to be his nemesis. Having Khusrau die an ignoble death, trapped in the fortress he had built for his ill-gotten wealth, starved, insulted and abandoned before finally being shot down like a wild beast would no doubt have both fitted the theme and appealed to the writers.

Of course, the question remained of why the nobility would wish to overthrow Khusrau II. After all, up until the last two years, Persia had had a very successful war. Sassanid generals had conquered Syria and Palestine, Anatolia and Egypt. All

²⁸⁹ Al-Tabari 1060.

²⁹⁰ Sebeos 127.

²⁹¹ Movses Daskhuranst'i II.12-13 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.217-219.

²⁹² *Chronicon Paschale* 727.15-734.17 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.220-223.

of these remained in Persian hands, with Shahrvaraz's army still in enemy territory as well, it may be presumed, as garrisons of the conquered cities. Given that the nobility were at the forefront of the campaign, fighting as *kataphraktoi* or *clibanarii* heavy cavalry or as commanders of armies, they would have been in a position to gain great wealth for themselves and their families as well as glory on the field of battle. And some probably did. However, while war did have its advantages for a Persian noble, there were also disadvantages. After all, the war had now entered its twenty-fifth year. Children born as it began would now have grown and been recruited to serve in the army as well. An entire generation of Persians had been reduced significantly by the casualties, while many of them would have spent long periods of time away from home. Then there were the taxes required to pay for it in addition to the drain on the economy. It should be noted here that at least two field armies were active for the entirety of the war under the generals Farrokhan, better known as Shahrvaraz, and Shahin Patgospan, with a third operating against Heraclius led by Rhahzadh in the previous year. In addition, there were the garrisons necessary to hold the conquered territories. All of these soldiers would have had to come from the western provinces of the Empire to avoid draining the garrisons protecting the eastern frontier. Although this was the most fertile part of the Empire, the reduction in the number of available farmers is unlikely to have been significant, although our lack of information on the recruiting practices of the Persian army makes it difficult to know how many of those fighting in the west were farmers or how many prisoners were sent back to the heartlands of the Empire to make up any shortfalls.

However, the Persians no longer appeared to be winning the war. While they had conquered the bulk of the Byzantine Empire, they had no way to take Constantinople and finish their conquest. Equally, the bulk of the Persian armies were now tied up in the West, including the elite of their troops, garrisoning the conquered territories or simply in their winter encampments. More importantly, a Byzantine army had now invaded Mesopotamia - the heart of the Empire - and defeated a Persian army on its own ground, and destroyed one of the great temples of the Zoroastrian faith which had been dedicated to the *Shahanshah* in particular at Gandzak.²⁹³ Thus, while the Sassanids retained the upper hand overall, the devastation of their heartlands by the Byzantines showed that the enemy was now in a position to potentially decapitate the Empire while they could not do the same.

In addition, while the most recent events might have been the trigger, it is also possible that it was because they provided an opportunity. It would not be the first time that Mesopotamia had been invaded by Roman armies, and the previous attempts had usually ended in disaster as with that of Julian the Apostate in 363. If Khusrau had been able to hold on long enough to recall troops from the East or from elsewhere in the occupied territories, he might have been able to win the war by destroying Heraclius before he could retreat. If he had done so, and thus potentially captured or killed the Byzantine Emperor, his prestige would have been untouchable. It is possible that Kavad-Siroes and the nobles with him gambled that they could overthrow Khusrau and then recall Shahrvaraz or the eastern armies themselves, thus taking the credit for the victory. Even if this was not the case, there would be no better opportunity to overthrow Khusrau than in the chaos following the battle of

²⁹³ Sebeos 124.

Nineveh and to wait would only allow the Byzantines to inflict further damage on the Empire.

With all this in mind, it is difficult to establish the precise motives of the plotters.

Fear may have played a part, particularly if they were survivors of Nineveh, that either Khusrau would punish them for their failure or would order them to face the victorious Byzantines again. Neither prospect can have been terribly appealing.

Some of them may have calculated that Kavad-Siroes would be a more controllable ruler than his father, particularly given the situation in Persia and the reduction of central power. As he would need the nobility, they would be able to control him, which had not been true of Khusrau at any point of his reign. As for Kavad-Siroes himself, he may have been motivated by fear of the favour that Khusrau was now showing Merdanshah, his son by Shirin.²⁹⁴ Finally, Khusrau had managed to alienate Shahrvaraz at least partially, and thus another reason may have been that the nobles realised that their only hope of recalling his army was to replace the *Shahanshah*.

The position and actions of the Persian army led by Shahrvaraz were crucial to the events that unfolded. He commanded the last intact Persian army in the field and one that remained in control of enemy territory.²⁹⁵ In addition, as he had been successful in most battles to this point, it is not difficult to imagine that Shahrvaraz's personal prestige and popularity with his army were both high. As noted previously, he did not move to assist Khusrau II against Heraclius in 628 and this has been explained previously by assuming that either Shahrvaraz had come to an agreement with

²⁹⁴ Howard-Johnston 2004: 96.

²⁹⁵ Sebeos 126.

Heraclius²⁹⁶ or that he was a part of the coup, if only from a distance.²⁹⁷ The principal source that claimed this is Theophanes, although the *Shahnameh* also implicated the general in events.²⁹⁸ However, this evidence is not concrete. Theophanes presented two pieces of evidence regarding the conduct of Shahrvaraz in the year in question. First he wrote that Khusrau, persuaded that his general had betrayed him to the Romans, sent a letter to his fellow commander that he should kill Shahrvaraz and bring the army back to fight Heraclius. The Byzantines apparently captured the messenger and they used this to convince Shahrvaraz to renounce Khusrau II and make a separate agreement with Heraclius.²⁹⁹

On the face of it, this story would seem to show that Shahrvaraz abandoned Khusrau to his fate. The problem is that, while there certainly was a meeting between Shahrvaraz and Heraclius, Sebeos indicated that it occurred later, after the death of Kavad-Siroes, and that it was the occasion when Shahrvaraz promised to remove his army from the conquered territories and return the fragments of the True Cross still in Persian hands in exchange for aid in his own attempt at becoming *Shahanshah*.³⁰⁰ It is more likely, based on this, that it was this meeting that Theophanes meant, and that Shahrvaraz did not meet Heraclius prior to this. While this might not seem to have much impact on the relations between king and nobility, it does allow for another approach to the events of the coup itself.

By 628, the two empires had been at war for twenty-five years. The nobility can be divided into two groups. One consists of those who have been fighting in the

²⁹⁶ Al-Tabari 1008-1009.

²⁹⁷ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

²⁹⁸ *Shahnameh* p. 817-818.

²⁹⁹ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

³⁰⁰ Sebeos 129-130.

campaigns against the Romans either as generals, such as Shahrvaraz and Shahin, or as *kataphraktoi* and part of other elite units. These would be the ones who were gaining the most benefits of the war, as they would receive the plunder that was not reserved for the king and were the most likely to be rewarded with new land if the war was won. On the other hand, these were also the nobles who were most likely to be punished for the recent defeats that the Persian armies had suffered in the field. In fact, Sebeos related that Khusrau ‘began to gather the surviving nobles and addressed them with fearsome condemnations’.³⁰¹ These nobles were the survivors from the battle of Nineveh, but a similar occurrence may have appeared all too possible to the nobles who were part of the other defeated armies.

This lends itself well to a comparison with the earlier revolt of Bahram Chobin, although there are differences in the circumstances. While both Bahram and Shahrvaraz were generals who rebelled against their king due to a defeat in battle which they felt may have led to punishment, Shahrvaraz did not march upon the capital, either to support the rebellious nobles, to aid the king in the hope of a pardon or to defend it against the encroaching Byzantine army. This may appear odd at first glance, but there were factors in play that prevented Shahrvaraz from acting directly. According to Sebeos,³⁰² his army was encamped north of Lake Van in the province of Aliovit before he marched them west to Anatolia to rest and regroup. Thus he would have been at least 500 miles away from Ctesiphon and probably more. It would have taken a messenger some time to find him, riding through the mountains in winter and having to avoid any Byzantine patrols. Further, once Shahrvaraz knew of events, it would have taken an army even longer to make the same trip with no

³⁰¹ Sebeos 127.

³⁰² Sebeos 125-126.

guarantee that he would arrive in time to influence events at the definite cost of having to uproot his soldiers from comparatively comfortable winter quarters. Finally, to move his army would have meant essentially giving the Persian western conquests back to the Byzantines, and as can be seen from later developments, Shahrvaraz was unwilling to do so.

Returning to the comparison with the uprising of Bahram, in both cases, the coup itself was undertaken by parties within the court on behalf of the heir apparent. As earlier with Khusrau, it is impossible to determine with certainty whether the principal architect of events was Kavad-Siroes or the nobles who conspired with him. Theophanes implied that Kavad-Siroes was the first to speak of revolt and he is the most reliable source on these events.³⁰³ On the other hand, Movses Daskhurants'i named a noble 'who was protector of the first-born of [Khusrau] who was called Kavad',³⁰⁴ as the one who started the plot on behalf of Kavad-Siroes, while al-Tabari specifically said that 'the Persians rose up against [Khusrau] and killed him, aided by his son [Kavad-Siroes], son of Maryam al-Rumiyyah'.³⁰⁵ In short, there are arguments to be made in favour of both interpretations, and reasons for both parties to have made the first move. In the case of the fall of Hormizd IV, the coup was led by the disaffected nobles in favour of Khusrau II, but as mentioned above, the circumstances were very different.

Another part of the puzzle is the religious affiliations of the various parties. While Khusrau had certainly supported Christians in the early part of his reign, he was

³⁰³ Theophanes *A.M.* 6118.

³⁰⁴ Movses Daskhurants'i II.12-13 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.217-219.

³⁰⁵ Al-Tabari 1045.

married to at least one and probably two Christians; and some of his chief officials were also Christians.³⁰⁶ The *Shahnameh* made Kavad-Siroes the son of Maria, which is certainly possible given the limited evidence.³⁰⁷ All that can be extracted from the relevant parts of the other sources is that he was a son of Khusrau and probably not a son of Shirin, due to him not being identified with her in places where it would have been easier to list him with her son Merdanshah.³⁰⁸ What is certain is that Kavad-Siroes was older than Merdanshah and apparently had closer links with the nobility or at least their sons than his rival.³⁰⁹ One possible suggestion why this might be the case is that Kavad-Siroes claimed to favour a course true to the Zoroastrian origins of the Sassanid dynasty while Merdanshah had become associated with his mother's Christianity and his father's failure. Given that Maria does not appear much in even those sources where she is mentioned, it is possible that her son (if Kavad-Siroes was actually her son) had rejected her faith at least outwardly and there is nothing to suggest that he favoured the Christians during his short reign.

This raises the question of the very reason that Theophanes gave for the revolt – that Khusrau had planned to disinherit Kavad-Siroes in favour of Merdanshah whom he intended to crown.³¹⁰ It is true that there was at least one precedent for this in the history of the dynasty – Ardashir I had made his son, Shapur I, co-ruler for a period as can be seen from coinage bearing the heads of both men. However, this came towards the end of Ardashir's reign, shortly before his death. Thus, this may be explained by Shapur continuing the fighting on the frontiers while Ardashir dealt

³⁰⁶ Shirin was certainly a Christian and while Maria was almost certainly not the daughter of Maurice, there is still enough evidence to consider that Khusrau may have had a Byzantine wife by that name.

³⁰⁷ *Shahnameh* p.813.

³⁰⁸ Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 231.

³⁰⁹ Theophanes *A.M.* 6118.

³¹⁰ Theophanes *A.M.* 6118.

with matters closer to home. Regardless, the situation was utterly different from that facing Khusrau II. Nothing in the only source to mention the incident, Theophanes, suggests that he was preparing to abdicate and doing so in the middle of the crisis would have been foolish. None of the other sources even suggest that he was planning to crown Merdanshah. However, as referred to above, Theophanes provided the basic narrative structure. So, how to explain this seeming contradiction?

To explain it, it is necessary to look at the list of complaints that al-Tabari had Kavad-Siroes send to Khusrau explaining why he was overthrown. The first one is as follows:³¹¹

Your crime against your father [Hormizd], your violence toward him, depriving him of the royal power, blinding his eyes, killing him in a most horrible fashion, and all the great burden of guilt you have brought upon yourself by injuring him.

Now, here Kavad-Siroes is deploring the very idea of overthrowing a king, let alone having him blinded and then executed, and yet that is exactly what he does to his own father. While this may have been acceptable to the nobles on the spot, it might not have been so easy to convince the Emperor Heraclius of that, particularly not after the entire Persian justification for the war had hinged on the murder of Maurice.³¹² And while we, with the benefit of hindsight, know that Heraclius was later happy to make a bargain with Shahrvaraz to seize the throne of Persia in exchange for the return of the True Cross, it is perhaps understandable that Kavad-

³¹¹ Al-Tabari 1046.

³¹² Theophylact VIII.15.7.

Siroes did not wish to risk the survival of his kingdom on it.³¹³ Thus, he may have lied to the Emperor, claiming that the violation of his right of primogeniture was the reason for his overthrow of his own father and his later execution – despite this practice not being the case in Sassanid Persia – thus bringing it in line with Heraclius’ own overthrow of the usurper Phocas.

This would also explain why Theophanes presented Kavad-Siroes as the leader of the movement so definitely.³¹⁴ After all, the overthrow of a king, even a hated Persian *Shahanshah*, by his own nobility would not be a movement that a Byzantine emperor could support. On the other hand, Kavad-Siroes seems to have had the best claim to the throne and thus his participation was easier to explain. Finally, if he was the son of a Byzantine woman, then Heraclius might have calculated that he was more likely to be sympathetic to his goals than Khusrau himself or one of his other sons.

Regardless, Theophanes also made an interesting statement regarding the participants in the conspiracy. Rather than, as al-Tabari stated,³¹⁵ just naming them Persians or even, as Sebeos did,³¹⁶ the nobles, he specified that they were the sons of nobles, including the son of Aram along with others, whom he did not name.³¹⁷ This lends credence to the theory that the coup was engineered by the cabal about Kavad-Siroes formed by the younger nobles of his own age who would benefit most from his coming to power, rather than the older generation, which had already been thinned by years of war. Further, while the participation of Shahrvaraz’s sons might

³¹³ Sebeos 128-130.

³¹⁴ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

³¹⁵ Al-Tabari 1045.

³¹⁶ Sebeos 127.

³¹⁷ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

seem to indicate his own involvement, that is not necessarily the case. After all, the limits on communications applied equally and it is just as likely that his sons responded to his fall from favour by attempting to remove Khusrau II. The level of detail that Theophanes presented here is the principal reason why he is considered the best source on this incident.

Again, there is the potential to see how the different factions within the Sassanid court are linked back to the mothers of the competing princes. Due to the chaos of the Byzantine invasion, any process of succession that may or may not have existed was no longer functional. In truth, it seems that the process of succession relied upon the prestige of the king decreeing it and the ability of his successor to take and hold the throne against any siblings who might challenge him for it or any nobles that wished to be the power behind the *Shahanshah*. In particular, one of the first actions of Kavad-Siroes was the execution of all his brothers.³¹⁸ Theophanes here said ‘siblings’ or ‘all his other children’ rather than brothers,³¹⁹ but this is likely to be an error. At least two of Khusrau’s other children, the princesses Purandokht and Azarmidukht, survived to reign in their own right in later years although these may have been Kavad-Siroes’ full sisters and the daughters of Maria, the Byzantine wife of Khusrau, which would tie into a theory based upon amphimetrisism.³²⁰ In addition, the parents of both Ardashir III and of Yazdgird III are uncertain, although the former was probably the son of Kavad-Siroes and the latter the son of Shahriyar who may have been a son of Khusrau and Shirin,³²¹ and thus the survival of at least some other children of Khusrau II cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, none of them, again

³¹⁸ Movses Daskhuranst’i II.12-13 (from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.219); Theophanes A.M. 6118; Sebeos 127; al-Tabari 1060.

³¹⁹ *ἑτερογενῆς* in the Greek.

³²⁰ Sebeos 130 and al-Tabari 1064-1066.

³²¹ Theophanes A.M. 6118.

excepting the *Shahnameh*, mention the fate of Shirin.³²² This is revealing on several levels. First, as Movses Daskhuranst'i wrote, Kavad-Siroes may have had his brothers mutilated before resorting to murder.³²³ In theory, this would have barred them from taking the throne, for the *Shahanshah* had to attain a certain physical standard, although the details are unknown as to what that standard might have been. A comparison might be made to the Byzantine practice of slitting the tongues or noses of fallen Emperors prior to sending them to a monastery – it saved the usurper from the odium of having to execute an Emperor or a member of the Imperial family, but still allowed for a certain measure of security. While the same seems to have held true in Sassanid Persia, the standards were rather different as can be seen by the problems that Khusrau I had with his brothers, one of whom should have been barred from the throne by his physical deformities.³²⁴ Given this precedent, it is perhaps not surprising that Kavad-Siroes chose the simpler and bloodier expedient of killing his brothers as noted in the sources, and it is probable that the nobles who had supported him concurred with this course of action.

There is almost nothing that can be said about the nobility in the reign of Kavad-Siroes that has not already been mentioned. The sources for his reign are brief in the extreme, and primarily deal with the fall of Khusrau and his relations with the Romans. The former have been noted already and the latter have little bearing on the debate at hand. There is one exception. During the reign of Kavad-Siroes, Shahrvaraz remained in Byzantine territory despite orders to the contrary.³²⁵ Quite simply, the *Shahanshah* lacked the ability to bring his rogue general to heel and this

³²² *Shahnameh* p.826-831.

³²³ Movses Daskhurants'i II.12-13 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.219.

³²⁴ Procopius *Wars* I.11.4.

³²⁵ Sebeos 128.

may be seen as a harbinger of things to come. After all, if the king could not control one general, how could he or his successors expect to control the others?

Another point of interest, already briefly touched upon, is the issue of Christianity and Zoroastrianism. While it is difficult to say with certainty what position Kavad-Siroes took on religion due to the brief time for which he reigned, there is enough information to make such a judgement on one of his successors. Shahrvaraz became *Shahanshah* following the deaths of Kavad-Siroes and his successor Ardashir III. In the writings of Nicephorus I, he stated that, at a meeting between Heraclius and Shahrvaraz to discuss his bid for the Persian crown, ‘Heraclius conferred the dignity of patrician upon Nicetas, the son of Shahrvaraz, and gave the latter’s daughter Nike in marriage to his own son Theodosius, born of Martina’.³²⁶ Both Nike and Nicetas are Greek rather than Persian in origin, which would suggest that they, if not Shahrvaraz himself, were Christians. In this light, the murder of Shahrvaraz after only forty days on the throne becomes rather easier to explain.³²⁷ After all, the fact that he was not a member of the house of Sassan was unlikely to be the sole problem as the same had been true of Bahram Chobin, and in any case there was no male Sassanid prince of an age to rule independently, as the successor to Shahrvaraz was Purandokht, daughter of Khusrau II. In any case, the notion of a Christian sitting upon the throne of Persia would have been unthinkable to the Zoroastrian priests and probably to the nobility. It is true that some of the previous *Shahanshahs* had shown tolerance to the Christians, but there was a wide gap between that and accepting one as ruler, particularly if there was the chance that he would found his own dynasty – in short, Shahrvaraz could easily have become a Persian Constantine, and that would

³²⁶ Nicephorus XVII.1-19 from *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* p.226.

³²⁷ Al-Tabari 1063.

probably have shattered what was left of the Sassanid state. In addition, he had either murdered or been responsible for the death of the young Ardashir III (or was perceived to be) and a combination of the above was probably the reason why he was murdered by a soldier so quickly. While there is no direct evidence that the nobility had a hand in it, it is extremely likely given the suppositions above that they at the very least did not discourage it. After all, Shahrvaraz had the potential to be an extremely effective ruler and, as can be seen in the following reigns, the nobility preferred a ruler that they could manipulate.

In conclusion, the events surrounding the fall of Khusrau II and his immediate successors are often mentioned briefly by historians as an aftermath to his reign and a prelude to the final fall of their Empire twenty years later.³²⁸ More in-depth analyses tend to revolve around the relations with the Byzantine Empire rather than the internal politics of Persia, perhaps because the events seem so clear at first reading. However, in fact there is a great deal that a closer examination of these events can contribute to an understanding of the balance of power between the king and his nobles and it serves in some ways as an eerie mirror of the fall of Hormizd IV forty years previously. In brief, it is clear from the portrayal in the sources that a primary part was played in the deposition of Khusrau by the nobility. If not the primary motivators, they took a large role in the coup itself and its aftermath. There are deep implications for the success or otherwise of the reforms of Khusrau I to be read into this, particularly whether they were actually as successful as some historians like to infer at tipping the balance in favour of the *Shahanshah*. Certainly, to say that the power of the traditional nobility was 'broken once and for all' at any

³²⁸ Frye 1983: 170-172.

point in Sassanid history is to ignore the fact that they continued to play a key role in politics until the end, and indeed gained in power as the house of Sassan weakened.³²⁹ This can partly be attributed to external factors, but the lack of a strong successor to Khusrau II certainly played its part.

By then, however, it was too late to save the situation. The army, which had contributed so materially to the greatness of the dynasty, in the end brought about its downfall. The generals treated the provinces of which they were governors as their own fiefs in a manner that strikingly recalls the independent attitude of the satraps in the last days of the Achaemenian Empire. The Sassanid Empire crumbled away and disintegrated into a collection of petty states which are precisely enumerated by the Arab historians. No group or individual was capable of opposing the Arab advance. The new aristocracy created by [Khusrau] I was not as yet established and could provide no support for the tottering throne of a discredited family. Everything foundered under the onslaught of the uncivilised Beduin.³³⁰

With this passage, Ghirshman began to draw a veil over the end of Sassanid Persia, naming the cause of its defeat and downfall as the failure of the army and the nobility to unite around the House of Sassan in its hour of need, resulting in the collapse of both the state and of the dynasty that had ruled it for the last four hundred years. Weariness is often a factor in accounts of the end of Sassanid rule, in one form or another, be it the result of the long war with Byzantium that had resulted in large

³²⁹ Dignas and Winter 2007: 99.

³³⁰ Ghirshman 1951: 308.

casualties and vast parts of the western provinces being devastated or the proposed disaffection of the lower orders of society for both the Zoroastrian clergy and the nobility or even the nobility becoming separated from the ruling family. Even in more modern works, a variation on this theme can be found – Frye treated the Sassanid empire in this period much like the countries of the Middle Ages with an impotent king striving and failing to impose his will on the great feudal lords, whose power eclipsed his own.³³¹ However, while the medieval period had nations move from this stereotype to being centralised monarchies where the ruler held near absolute power, this trend seems to have reversed itself in the Sassanid Empire.

Here, the prevailing orthodoxy is that the reigns of Khusrau I and, to a lesser extent, Khusrau II were the peak of the power of the king as opposed to his nobility.

Following the reign of Khusrau II, it is traditional to view the rulers as pawns of others – be it Heraclius in the case of Shahrvaraz or the Persian nobility for the sisters Purandokht and Azarmidukht.³³² However, while this is certainly the route marked by some of the sources – particularly in the case of Shahrvaraz, where his debt to the Byzantine Emperor is present in most accounts,³³³ the sources recording the reigns of the two sisters and of Yazdgird III are generally not especially detailed on the subject of internal Persian affairs.³³⁴ Most of the Byzantine sources narrate primarily the arenas where Sassanids and Byzantines interact, and these were surprisingly few following the brief rule of Shahrvaraz. The war may have played a major role in this separation as neither state seems to have wished to renew the conflict or even to negotiate with the other – unsurprisingly perhaps, as there may

³³¹ Frye 1983: 170-172.

³³² Garthwaite 2005: 110-111.

³³³ For example, Theophanes mentioned it, as do al-Tabari and Sebeos.

³³⁴ Al-Tabari 1064-1065 on the reigns of the sisters. The account of Yazdgird's reign is longer, but mostly concerned with the fall of the empire.

have been considerable bitterness on both sides and at all levels of society. Not everyone, after all, would have wanted to sign peace in 591 or 628 and it is likely that many Persians wished to repay the enemy in the West for the shame of such a decisive defeat. Of course, the lack of contemporary Persian sources prevents a definite comment either way on this subject, but the transition from what must have seemed like total victory on all fronts for most of the war to defeat by a last minute Byzantine counter attack must have been devastating. Besides this, there was the shame that those nobles more concerned with the state of their country must have felt at the disarray immediately following its defeat.

It is true, as shown elsewhere, that there was great confusion in Persia during this period, for which the traditional explanation is that the nobles deliberately took advantage of the weakened central power to usurp it for themselves in their own domains.³³⁵ However, as with much of the history of Persia in this era, there are gaps in our sources. It may be considered that there was a difference between the provincial nobility, whether they held land on a frontier or had been assigned a post such as *marzban*, and those who were to be found at court. Of course, the court was to be found where the *Shahanshah* was, and the culture expressed in the art of the Sassanid dynasty shows that it was a martial culture at least in part, so all of the nobility would have known how to fight and hunt, even if those skills were not put into use very frequently. It is less likely that this distinction was recognised by the Persians, although it may have been more pronounced during times of war at least in terms of political alignments. There are definite signs at times, such as with the depositions of both Hormizd IV and Khusrau II, of family playing a crucial role, but

³³⁵ Frye 1983: 170-1.

not generally of regional affiliations. From the presentation of the tale of Smbat Bagratuni in Sebeos, it appears that the principle *marzbans* were placed in areas other than their homes to prevent precisely this type of rival power base being established.³³⁶ Of course, as with any period of Sassanid history, this relied upon the ability of the king to see his orders through should the noble in question resist. The case for the decentralisation of Sassanid power in this period often bases part of their claims upon the perceived weakness of the successors of Khusrau II and the short lived nature of their reigns.³³⁷ However, this is not entirely supported by evidence. It is true that, of the rulers that succeeded Khusrau, most did not survive the year. Yazdgird III was the exception and may well have been able to reverse the trend if he had been given the opportunity to do so.

One particular point of discontinuity between the scenario we are presented with by the sources, such as al-Tabari, and the interpretation placed upon it by scholars is related both to the perceived war-weariness and to the willingness of the nobility to risk their lives for the House of Sassan during the Arab invasions. An oft repeated theme is that of devastation, where Persia and Byzantium alike are shown to be ravaged countries which were unable to resist the Muslim attacks as they might have done otherwise.³³⁸ This ignores the fact that the Persians were able to put at least three armies into the field against the Arabs at al-Qadisiyyah in 636, at Jalula later that year and again at Nihawand in 642.³³⁹ While the size of an army is always questionable in sources, al-Tabari implied that a considerable Persian force was available in all three cases, although the armies were shattered in the aftermath of the

³³⁶ Sebeos 96-97.

³³⁷ Dignas and Winter 2007: 48.

³³⁸ Garthwaite 2005: 111-112.

³³⁹ Al-Tabari 2294, 2359, 2598.

two battles.³⁴⁰ In addition, this assumes that the forces deployed at al-Qadisiyyah were those which had been fighting on the frontier since the beginning of the 630s and which had won the Battle of the Bridge the year before, a success often not mentioned besides the defeats at al-Qadisiyyah and elsewhere. Thus, whatever the state of the elite units of *kataphraktoi* and others, there was still the potential for large and effective Persian armies to be raised until the end of the dynasty. In addition, while the western armies had been shattered by the constant fighting against the Byzantines with the exception of those commanded by Shahrvaraz, there is no evidence that the same was true of the eastern frontiers and the *Shahnameh* would seem to suggest that the eastern forces remained intact as late as the murder of Yazdgird in 651.³⁴¹ What may be argued is that there was a lack of veterans to train the new recruits and to support them in battle. Thus the Muslims may have faced large numbers of levied infantry, supported by the remains of the regular army and the heavy cavalry. However, the fact that the king was able to assemble three armies each of which is likely to have outnumbered the Muslim army opposing it suggests that the people, including the nobility were loyal to him and his House.³⁴² It is not until after al-Qadisiyyah that we hear of units defecting to the Muslim cause en masse and not until after Nihawand that towns and cities began to change sides without resisting.³⁴³ While al-Qadisiyyah certainly allowed the Muslim armies to penetrate the inner area of the Sassanid Empire, it was the defeat at Nihawand that marked the destruction of the Sassanid army.³⁴⁴ Following this, any resistance was

³⁴⁰ Al-Tabari 2337 and 2359.

³⁴¹ *Shahnameh* p.846-847.

³⁴² The Arab sources frequently list numbers for Sassanid armies far in excess of their own side. Therefore, while it is likely that the Persians outnumbered their enemy, and were almost certainly better equipped in the early phases of the campaign, it is unlikely that they mustered 120,000 for the battle of al-Qadisiyyah.

³⁴³ Al-Tabari 2340-2341 and 2626-2627.

³⁴⁴ Al-Tabari 2626.

mounted by the inhabitants of an area on their own against the invaders. Therefore, it appears that the nobility remained loyal to the royal family until, in some cases, the bitter end. Both Garthwaite³⁴⁵ and Frye³⁴⁶ comment on the evidence in Chinese sources for a continuing Sassanid presence in the areas to the east, including China, following the fall of their Empire and this would seem to suggest that it was more than a single prince who fled there. In addition, both authors also mention that the tombstone of a Persian woman of the Suren family was found there dating to the late ninth century. Clearly not all of the nobility had abandoned the Sassanids even at the end.

Another often remarked upon factor is the suggested lack of appeal that Zoroastrianism had for the common people of the realm, at least as practised by the Magian priesthood and the nobility.³⁴⁷ However, it is difficult to be certain of this. It is true that many Zoroastrians seem to have converted to the Muslim cause based on accounts in al-Tabari and other Muslim accounts; however, these declarations would be more convincing were it not for the degree to which such accounts are prone to exaggerate many facts about the Arab success. Further, such sources were written after the conquests and thus there is always the possibility that the collapse of support for the Sassanid dynasty has been emphasised and the degree of resistance to the inevitable triumph of Islam played down. Certainly, a common theme among historians is that the battle of al-Qadisiyyah marked the end of the Sassanid Empire in every respect bar the most obvious and that there was no way that the Empire could survive following it. In fact, the end was only truly reached at Nihawand, five years later, and either battle could have stopped the process of Islamic conquest in its

³⁴⁵ Garthwaite 2005: 111.

³⁴⁶ Frye 1983: 176.

³⁴⁷ Frye 1983: 174.

tracks, at least on the Persian front. Finally, the Persians at the time clearly felt that they had sufficient investment, be it physical or emotional, with the dynasty to fight for it as long as they could. While this may not be reflected in the sources, this is again possibly due to the lack of Persians writing contemporary history or the Muslim tendency to imply that their victory was inevitable. It is difficult, from this distance, to argue with that, although, as demonstrated earlier, clearly it was not the view at the time. Inevitable victories tend only to be viewed in that light after the event – as can be seen from more modern conflicts, such as World War II.

In short, the bulk of the Persian nobility, and possibly even the populace as a whole, retained ties to the House of Sassan as long as was practical. In comparison, the larger Achaemenid Empire crumbled in a much shorter time and with much less ongoing resistance, although there were mitigating factors there. Even so, the fact that there were major nobles who were willing to go into exile with the remainder of the royal family suggests that there were powerful families who felt that the Sassanids were, whatever their flaws, a far better proposition than these Bedouin tribesmen from out of the desert, who, according to al-Tabari, propagated notions that all men were equal and that wealth was unimportant even when faced with all the splendour and glory of Sassanid Persia.³⁴⁸ Such men were dangerous. When faced with a choice between the rule of Shahrvaraz and one of the daughters of Khusrau II, someone preferred the rule of a queen who was at least of the House of Sassan to a battle hardened general who was not. How can those who held such sentiments have viewed the coming of a band of Muslims, who were not even Persians let alone Zoroastrians? One suspects that they did not approve of it, which

³⁴⁸ Lengthy passages in al-Tabari Volume XII primarily before the battle of al-Qadisiyyah.

was what led to the exodus of some at least to the east and of others to fight until the end in what proved to be an ultimately futile struggle to preserve the last Sassanid monarch.

C O N C L U S I O N

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The relationship between the *Shahanshahs* of Sassanid Persia and their most powerful subjects is not an easy one to characterise simply, or indeed at all. A great part of this problem is the lack of source material, which is notably slender, even for Persian history, and the spread of this material over many years and traditions. Furthermore, the lack of interest that many writers of the ancient world show for topics that modern historians would find fascinating can be frustrating, Agathias and his misuse of the Sassanid archives for example.³⁴⁹ However, despite these setbacks, it is possible to assemble an argument about how the kings interacted with their chief nobles, particularly in the later period. As always, some extrapolation is needed in places and there is the need with certain events to determine which account is the most accurate or the least biased.

The hub around which this thesis turns is the reign of Khusrau I, and more specifically the reforms that he may have undertaken. It is these that are seen by historians such as Dignas and Winter to be the point of change from a nobility that was independently powerful of the *Shahanshah* to one that had lost the bulk of its ability to resist the will of the king.³⁵⁰ However, it is impossible to determine the exact balance of power before, during or after the reign of Khusrau I. The nature of the surviving evidence is such that only scattered examples survive, most of which are from times of upheaval where the normal relationship was not in evidence. What is possible is to build an idea of how this balance changed or failed to change across the existence of the Sassanid Empire.

³⁴⁹ Cameron 1969: 69.

³⁵⁰ Dignas and Winter 2007: 99.

The first chapter of this thesis dealt with the time before Khusrau I as well as the first years of his reign. It covers the longest period – almost three hundred years of the dynasty. This is due to the lack of evidence from the third to fifth centuries, with a few exceptions. Fortunately, the examples of the career of the priest Kartir,³⁵¹ those portions of the reign of Shapur II as described in Ammianus Marcellinus³⁵² and the reign of Kavad³⁵³ provide enough material for a comparison. The nobles and priests of the early years were seemingly generally loyal to their king so long as he remained successful and provided them with the opportunities that they sought. As such, they commanded armies, led embassies and any number of activities on behalf of the *Shahanshah*. However, when they felt that their interests were threatened, they were more than capable of acting to protect them. The obvious example is the overthrow and imprisonment of Kavad,³⁵⁴ but the same happened to Shapur III who was murdered rather than merely imprisoned.³⁵⁵

It is not disputed that the nobility of this period wielded great power. Indeed, it can be overestimated – the great campaigns were led by the *Shahanshah* in person well into the sixth century. Nor were the nobility overly restless in the grand scheme of events. It was in their interests to allow the king to conduct the campaigns against the Romans, as it was these campaigns that filled their coffers and allowed them to display their bravery in the traditional manner. Of course, the insight into these matters is limited by what the sources chose to pass down, but the tradition represented by al-Tabari provided at least some information about each Sassanid

³⁵¹ See his inscriptions at Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rostam.

³⁵² Ammianus Marcellinus on the invasion led by Julian in particular - Books XXIV and XXV.

³⁵³ Al-Tabari 883-888.

³⁵⁴ Al-Tabari 885-887 and Procopius *History of the Wars* I.5.1-4.

³⁵⁵ Al-Tabari 846.

ruler, even those for which the contemporary sources were silent or no longer in existence.

Armed with a vague summary of their reign at the least, it is feasible to decide whether any of the incidents listed are relevant to the question at hand. In many cases, they are not. The particular details of events at court that would be invaluable to a modern historian would either not be of interest or not be available to an ancient writer. Even if archives were kept, as the Sassanids did, these would be unlikely to be as detailed as we might wish and they do not survive in any event.

Moving on, the second chapter was concerned with the reforms themselves. Before returning to that though, the third chapter looked at the remainder of the Sassanid dynasty, from Hormizd IV to Yazdgird III. Here there is a much greater concentration of sources than the early years, covering a number of events in some detail, although still not as great as is first thought or desirable. These include the events surrounding the overthrow of Hormizd IV and accession of Khusrau II³⁵⁶ and the later coup against Khusrau II.³⁵⁷ Other interesting occurrences were the short reign of Shahrvaraz³⁵⁸ and the little we know about the Islamic conquests. It is from these events that the fallacy of the belief that the nobility was rendered powerless after the reforms of Khusrau I becomes apparent. The nobility and the great houses retained the ability to overthrow the *Shahanshah* should they so wish. In fact, they exercised that ability twice in only thirty years successfully.

³⁵⁶ Al-Tabari 993-1000 and Theophylact IV.

³⁵⁷ Al-Tabari 1043-1045.

³⁵⁸ Al-Tabari 1062-1063.

One aspect that does stand out even here is the lack of any alternate candidates for the throne. Bahram Chobin managed to secure it for a short period, but there is no evidence that his claim was recognised by the other nobles, and some at least remained with Khusrau II.³⁵⁹ Shahrvaraz took power for an even shorter period, but was then assassinated by one of his own men.³⁶⁰ Other than them, all the rulers came from the House of Sassan. Despite the catastrophic defeat, there was no revolt, such as that against the last Arsacid king, and the nobility as a whole seems to have remained loyal to their rulers, even if they took issue with some of them.

The middle chapter took the reforms of Khusrau I as its central premise. This may have seemed unusual in a thesis centring on the king and his nobles, particularly when the chapter itself dealt with the reforms to the exclusion of the nobility. However, it has been contended by Dignas and Winter that the reforms broke the power of the nobility,³⁶¹ while Rubin has argued that the reforms were successful only until the death of Khusrau I, and possibly not even that long.³⁶² However, the text of the reforms quoted at length in the second chapter indicates a more conservative approach than is widely acknowledged, more interested in the restoration of the state and with reminiscing upon a golden age than in innovation and novelty.³⁶³ Perhaps it is the reference in Procopius to Khusrau being fond of innovation that has led to this,³⁶⁴ but the reforms as they have survived do not appear entirely innovative. As always, the lack of contemporary evidence remains the greatest obstacle to a full appreciation of the reforms.

³⁵⁹ Sebeos 75.

³⁶⁰ Al-Tabari 1063.

³⁶¹ Dignas and Winter 2007: 99.

³⁶² Rubin 1995: 293.

³⁶³ Al-Tabari 894, 897-898, 960-961.

³⁶⁴ Procopius *History of the Wars* I.23.1.

It is only in combination with the evidence from the other two chapters that the context within which the reforms must be placed emerges fully. The sources that survive do not indicate any notable differences in how the nobility act before, during or after the reign of Khusrau I. Nor do the kings appear to have treated them any differently before or after. The *Shahanshah* remained the sole master of the Persian Empire and the great houses remained his chief subjects, from which were drawn the leaders of his armies (*Spahbads*), his diplomats and governors of the provinces (*marzbans*). It would be unusual if this were not true, for who else could the King of Kings call upon to fill the roles necessary to maintain the functioning of the kingdom? Certain roles could be filled by outsiders or the newly empowered *dehqans* but only the high ranking nobles had the experience in leading armies to war or in commanding the defence of a province that might fall under Byzantine attack. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the nobles present at court were those whom the *Shahanshah* would be aware of, and of whom he might perhaps have some knowledge. It would have been unlikely for the King of Kings to entrust an important command or mission to a man he had not met. Further, after the experience of the Mazdakites, it would be a brave (and probably short lived) *Shahanshah* who contemplated the dismissal of the traditional nobles in favour of a lower class. It is clear from Theophylact's writing that the tale of the fall of Kavad was still well known by the end of the sixth century.³⁶⁵ In short, it would have been in the interests of neither side to attempt to change the situation.

The relationship between the kings of Sassanid Persia and their nobility was most certainly one that flowed both ways. The king gave his nobles power and prestige in

³⁶⁵ Theophylact IV.6.6-11.

addition to the recognition due their station and accomplishments. As seen from the cases of Smbat Bagratuni³⁶⁶ and Seoses,³⁶⁷ service to the *Shahanshah* was the most important indicator of worth, and success would have offered vast rewards. In return, the nobility remained loyal to the dynasty without wavering through almost the entirety of the four centuries that the House of Sassan reigned over Persia. This should not be taken as meaning that the nobility formed a single united block, for there are clear indications that they did not. The ideal relationship was one of exchange, but there was change throughout the period. Strong or successful kings could garner stronger allegiance than weak monarchs, but their strength could disappear if events conspired against them, as shown with Khusrau II.³⁶⁸ Religion also played a role. A Zoroastrian was more likely to be popular with his nobles than a ruler who openly favoured Christians or heretics.³⁶⁹

It is impossible for an historian to be absolutely certain about the exact nature of this relationship. The information is not available for such precise details. What is possible, and what this thesis has set out to examine, is the change or otherwise in the relationship over the course of the Sassanid Empire using such examples as we have. The conclusion to be drawn is that, whatever the intended outcome of the reforms of Khusrau I, they did not alter the balance of power between the king and his nobles in any meaningful way. Indeed, it appears as if they were never intended to alter it. Instead, the reforms were used to restore Persian society to stability following a period of internal unrest as a result of the activities of the Mazdakite sect.

³⁶⁶ Sebeos 96.

³⁶⁷ Theophylact IV.6.11.

³⁶⁸ Howard-Johnston 2004: 96-97.

³⁶⁹ Al-Tabari 847.

It is possible that Khusrau I intended these reforms to create a bureaucracy to oppose the power of the nobility; however, even if this was proven to be the case, it needs to be seen in the light of similar attempts by several other *Shahanshahs* to do the same. It is not clear that this was the case though, for the reforms as presented by al-Tabari do not seem to have had the intention of creating or expanding the bureaucracy beyond what must have already existed in some form.³⁷⁰ There is the implication of greater organisation – the changes to the tax system³⁷¹ and to the cavalry³⁷² in particular – but that is far from being the same.

Thus, to conclude, there was no overall change to the mechanics of the relationship between the kings of Sassanid Persia and their chief nobles during the dynasty's reign. There were of course alterations in the manner in which particular rulers and specific nobles did so, but a difference must be seen between those details which we are not in a position to know and the wider sweep, or context, of their association which can be determined from examination of the source material. The former was mutable and ever-changing, as any relationship is. The latter, however, may be safely said to have remained unchanged throughout the reign of the Sassanid dynasty.

³⁷⁰ Al-Tabari 894, 897-898, 960-963.

³⁷¹ Al-Tabari 960-963.

³⁷² Al-Tabari 894 and 897.

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Maps:

Both maps are originally from Greatrex, G. and Lieu, S. N. C. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II: AD 363-630* (Routledge, 2002). p. xxviii and xxix.